

**An ethnographic study exploring the experiences of  
women who participate in power sports.**

**A Thesis submitted by  
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In partial completion of the award of  
*Masters by Research***

**'I hereby declare that the Thesis submitted is wholly the work of  
*Janine Davis*  
Any other contributors or sources have either been referenced  
in the prescribed manner or are listed in the acknowledgements  
Together with the nature and scope of their contribution.'**

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# Abstract

There is an increasing awareness of the need to understand the experiences of women who are involved in sports that, by perceptions underpinned by traditional gender ideology, are 'masculine' in nature. The aim of this study is therefore to explore the experiences of women who currently participate in power sports. To achieve this aim four objectives were set: (1) To explore the motivations for women's involvement in power sports (2) To understand how such involvement challenges the traditional ideology within such a masculine sporting domain, (3) To critically explore the perceived effect of masculine sporting ideologies female in power sports affect the everyday social life of participants and (4) To examine women's experience of prejudice within power sports. An ethnographic approach has been adopted to undertake this research, where participant observation, interviews and an auto-ethnographic account of the researcher's experiences in the culture of power sports, specifically weightlifting and power lifting, along with experiences in the culture of Thai boxing, were collected to provide rich data.

The key findings of the study are that more women are participating in these male dominated sports and are challenging the traditional notions of femininity. The research has shown that women in the study are using power sports to emancipate themselves through challenging the simplistic masculine/feminine dichotomy. The study also highlights that sport is still an arena, however, where ideas about gender and gender difference are still powerfully constituted, expressed and rarely challenged.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

BWLA: British Weightlifting Association

BPC: British Powerlifting Congress



# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### **1.0 Background and Historical Context to the research**

Women's participation in sport over the last 120 years has seen dramatic change. In 2016 women can, in many cases, now participate in a full range of sporting activities. This has not always been the case. Previously, society has defined sport as a dominantly male arena, and women were met with resistance when they attempted to be included within sporting environments. Sport in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was identified as a male activity and success in this arena was based on strength, aggression and power. All of these attributes outline the ideology of masculinity, and the concept of sporting ability for women was not compatible with the traditional subordinate role in patriarchal society, challenging the myth of female fragility (Jarrat, 1990). To be feminine in western culture was all too often presumed to be submissive, weak, and intellectually inferior (Bryson, 1987).

Another popular argument for women's exclusion from sport was potential damage to the reproductive organs, an argument advanced by the medical profession in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which reinforced the cultural practices that meant that women were continually marginalised and suppressed from entering sports deemed to be too dangerous for them to participate in (Fasting, 1987; Williamson et al 1985; Jarratt, 1990). The Victorian assumptions that saw women as fragile and unable to participate in anything associated with physical strength meant that women were, for example, excluded from the very first Olympic Games in 1886 (Messner, 1988), events for women, once they were included, being limited to archery, figure skating and lawn tennis. Sports that were seen as feminine appropriate, and suited the ideology that systematically blocked women from sports that emphasized strength and physical contact (O'Reilly and Cahn, 2007). Even these activities were restricted, and would have only been available to the middle to upper class women,

who would have had the access to the necessary funds to enable them to train and the time to participate in these chosen sports. Because of the limited inclusion of events this meant that very few women were involved. The few sportswomen that did participate in the early years, however, gave women the increasing visibility and legitimacy that would provide the means for steady growth for women in this movement (Messner, 1988).

Such growth was demonstrated by the inclusion of the very first athletics programme for women, which was introduced to the Olympic movement in 1928 (O'Reilly and Cahn, 2007). Athletics for women in this time laid the groundwork for fundamental challenges against the idea of sport as a male dominated arena and provided the means to show women's physicality for sport. This would coincide with first wave feminism, where women were fighting for the right to be included in the games across more disciplines that demonstrated strength and speed. The names of Mildred 'Babe' Didrikson and Fanny Blankers-Koen were held as the greatest female athletes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Both had captured the imagination of the nation and had also shown the means for dispelling the myth of the physically fragile female (Guttman, 1991). These women were the template of the 1920's that showed other women that they were able to pursue sports that were otherwise closed to them (Hargreaves, 1996; Harry, 1995).

Since the 1920's there has been a rapid increase in women's inclusion in the Olympic movement (Williams et al, 1985). Women were now allowed to participate in more and more events, but this inclusion was not without resistance. An example of this was the response of Avery Brundage, President of the IOC from 1952 – 1972 quoted in 1936

*"I am fed up to the ears with women as track and field competitors. As swimmers and Divers, girls are beautiful and adroit".* (Hargreaves, 1996, p. 216).

In 1949 Brundage again expressed disgust at the sight of muscular women participating in the new shot put event that had been included in the Olympic programme, and along with opposition from other women who objected to seeing women in this event, tried to remove shot put and discus in 1966 (Hargreaves, 1996). It was not until the 1960's, and the emergence of second wave feminism, that there

would be a breaking down of the Victorian cult of true woman hood leading to a more flexible concept of what was considered feminine thus helping to break down the myth of competitive sport being masculine in its nature (Costa and Guthrie, 1994).

Following this, sport for women through the 1960's and 1970's was radically transformed and as second wave feminism swept across western society old attitudes were eroded and washed away (Guttmann, 1991). Legal legislation that culminated in Title IX being passed in the United States of America meant that discrimination based on gender saw the participation rates of women in every sporting activity soar (Costa and Guthrie, 1994).

By the 1980's, women's inclusion in more sporting activities that challenged the out dated Victorian ideologies that saw women as weak and submissive, meant that more women were training longer and harder than they had ever done before, and they were less inhibited by the fears of masculinization and of the whispered references of lesbianism (Guttman, 1991). This new ideology would coincide with the third wave feminism of the 1990's that characterised independence, assertiveness, rationality, powerfulness and strength instead of the repressive terms of weak, submissive and unable to make decisions for themselves (Williams, 2012). Women of the 1990's were now making strides in defining their own identity as the equal gender. The sporting arena allows individuals to set their own goals, it enables a person to take on a challenge and succeed (Defrantz, 1997).

Moving forwards to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, women are now able to compete in every sporting activity within the Olympic movement. Despite this, engrained ideologies continue to dictate that sport is a masculine domain. The ongoing barriers that girls and women face are the remnants of the traditional social structure that separated men and women and defined men as the superior gender that were given centre stage in almost all sports (Straurowsky, 2016). Therefore, more research has to be done it is essential that women have role models in sport. This would encourage more girls at grass roots and women of all ages to engage in sport and break down the barriers for some women that still see sport as a male dominated activity. For many women being 'sporty' is at odds with being feminine and for most women they feel that sport and exercise are not for them.

## **1.2 Women, Sport & Femininity**

The sociological construct of femininity is difficult to conceptualise as it is bound to its historical context meaning that it changes over time (Krane et al, 2014). Trangback (1997) adds that femininity and masculinity are based on biological differences that are reinforced through ideology and social practice, in other words masculinity is celebrated in sport as being strong powerful and competitive and femininity in society and sport is defined as weak, frail and co-operative, whilst women are continually marginalised through male hegemony that is still at the forefront of sport. Cultural attitudes toward variant choices made by women have changed significantly over the past one hundred and twenty years. Feminine ideologies that were prevalent in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century have fortunately moved forwards in 2017 enabling women to participate in all sports. Unfortunately, in order to be accepted as athletes' women still have to define and represent themselves as feminine.

Krane et al (2014) and Paechter (2006) include that a woman's choice to be feminine is not wholly a choice; for women to be socially accepted the only choice would appear to be conformity with the ideal of the time. They highlight the fact that femininity was generally associated with being submissive, nurturing, domesticity and beauty; being masculine is associated with competitiveness, being ambitious and strong. When you associate these ideals with women that participate in power sports it is not difficult to see that the journey for women to be included in this arena has been arduous.

Socially women may be approaching equalisation of opportunity but the research would suggest that women are still struggling with the fact that they have to emphasise their femininity in order to be accepted in society (Hanold, 2010; Hall,

1988; Ross and Shinew, 2008; Fink and Kensicki, 2002; Krane, 2001). This is especially true when women engage in activities not typically associated with femininity - such as power sports. Follo (2006) identifies the fact that women entering a masculine defined activity need to keep their feminine identity thus creating a paradox between femininity and masculinity; in order for society to accept this challenge, society has allowed women to enter into power sports, only if they express their femininity.

Lindsey Vonn, a highly decorated American alpine skier who was named Sportswoman of the year by the U.S. Olympic Committee in 2010, had massive media coverage following her success. This coverage included a cover of Sports Illustrated, but instead of featuring an action shot of Vonn skiing down a mountain emphasizing her athletic talent, the magazine portrayed Vonn in a suggestive position, emphasizing traditional notions of femininity. This emphasised femininity has allowed Vonn to negotiate the challenges facing women athletes being labelled as butch or masculine. This demonstrates how the media are in control of how female athletes are perceived, by portraying them in ways that emphasize their femininity and heterosexuality rather than their athletic prowess (La Bella, 2013). Feminists have long argued the way that women have been portrayed in the media actually minimizes their athletic performance, the post-feminist perspective, view women's use of their sex appeal as empowering and suggest that some women have exploited their physical attractiveness to promote their careers. An example of this is Ronda Rousey- the first female fighter to be top of the bill in the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) claims that women do not have to trade their femininity for athleticism. Despite this she admits that: -

*“Yeah, the looks thing helps because this isn't amateur sports. This isn't The Olympics, this isn't idealism. Its professional sports, a marketing business. If you're a girl, fucking looks help in every single industry out there. It's just a fucking fact of life”* (Gregory, 2013 p. 137).

On the one hand Rousey is sending a positive message for women in sport and then on the other shows the female apologetic for the fact that she is a female athlete who has to use her looks for marketability (Weaving, 2014). Wertheim et al (2004) supports the idea that female athletes use their femininity to present themselves

successfully within the media, and includes the premise that today's female athletes are much more comfortable being both strong athletes and alluring females. They use Serena Williams as an example of this, a high profile female athlete who is just as comfortable being on the catwalk or in a bikini as she is on court ripping off a forehand winner. Wertheim et al (2004) go on to argue that female athletes should be presented as both strong and alluring. However, Roth and Bascow (2004) argue that women should not have to emphasize their femininity in line with societal expectations. The research argues that whilst engagement in athletic activities can be empowering for women, maintaining an acceptable feminine demeanour may be experienced as disempowering (Rawlinson, 2014; Krane, 2001). Furthermore, Roth and Bascow (2004) point out that not all female athletes are comfortable emphasizing their sexuality and femininity, which can lead to implications that they are not 'real' women. Their research suggests that failure to emphasize hyper-femininity within sport has implications towards sexual orientation, women will either have to prove that they are not a lesbian or have to hide the fact that they are. Accusations of maleness experienced by female athletes have encouraged sex testing in order to prove the femininity of a female athlete (Roth and Bascow, 2004). An example of this testing was seen in 2009 World Athletics Championships where South African Caster Semenya was publicly put through the media and sex testing because of her outstanding performances in the 800m. An article written by Wells and Darnell (2014) report that proponents of the International Association of Athletics Federations argue that sex testing is a fair and practical way to ensure safety and competitiveness in women's sport. The testing accurately sorts competitors into appropriate categories according to convention, science and humanitarian values. The sex testing practice has been shown to be completely inaccurate and ineffective in proving such accusations. This theory only asserts that sex testing participates in a tradition that perpetuates social hierarchies and stereotypes, affirming men's superiority in sport.

Whilst the critics argue that sex testing violates the rights to privacy they fail to highlight the fact that this, once again, reaffirms the idea that women are not able to be powerful and strong and the idea of a woman succeeding in sport or being equal to a man is not acceptable and could only be achieved if she were cheating as nowhere in history have men had to go through the same humiliating practices.

### **1.3 Summary**

Women now have much more freedom of choice, not only in their work and family life, but also women can participate in any sport they choose to. The literature shows that traditional ideologies are still prevalent in society and women are still struggling with the idea of femininity and athletic participation. For these ideas to change in society the gendered expectations that are imposed on people from a young age needs to change and more research should be done in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to see what the athletes are experiencing from a firsthand view.

### **1.4 Rationale for topic choice**

Women's continual increasing involvement in physically demanding sports has meant that there are a number of studies that look at women's participation and their experiences whilst being involved in them (Paul 2015; Krane 2001; Weaving 2014; Howe 2003; Liimakka 2011; Dworkin 2001). They highlight the importance of understanding what it means for these women and reiterate that "*future research should continue to detail women's experiences in sport, including both the joys and challenges of athletic performance*" (Paul 2015; p.430). The sports that have been researched include rugby, football, roller derby, mixed martial arts and body building. It has been very difficult to find any research that looks at what it means for women to be involved in power sports, making this study the first of its context.

I have been involved in sports all my life and have experienced first-hand what it means to be a female athlete. My professional sporting career came later in life at twenty-seven where I had my first full contact freestyle fight, kicking boxing with low kicks. I went on to become Southern Area Thai boxing champion 2001, British Kickboxing Champion 2002, and World Thai boxing Champion 2003. I then transferred my skills and discipline into another sport, power lifting, where I then became BWLA (British Weightlifting Association) silver medalist powerlifting 2005, BWLA British unequipped champion 2006, BPC (British Powerlifting Congress) British powerlifting Champion 2008 & 2009, BPC World Powerlifting Champion 2009. I then transferred into Olympic weightlifting where I took Bronze at the

British Seniors 2013, British Masters Weightlifting Champion 2013 & 2014 & 2015, English Weightlifting Champion 2013 and finally European Masters Weightlifting Champion 2015. I am now forty-four years old and I am now pursuing a new path in the CrossFit arena. I will at some point start competing in the Masters division and will see where my journey takes me. I know what it is to sit outside of what is deemed the glass ceiling of muscular growth for women as explained by Dworkin (2001) and also challenge the traditional notions of women being weak and passive (Krane et al 2014).

My journey at University has lead me to this point. I started my first research project at Foundation level trying to understand what my motivation is to still keep competing, using an autoethnographic approach enabled me to learn the basics of what qualitative research is. I then went on to produce an ethnography at undergraduate level looking at Ageism in sport, again trying to improve on what I had learnt at foundation level. I am now still learning and mastering at postgraduate level. I am improving all the time and hope that this research project will show what I have embraced whilst I have been at Bournemouth University.

### **1.5 Research aim and objectives**

The aim of this ethnography is to explore and evaluate women's experiences of power sports. Power sports has traditionally been seen as a masculine sport. In order to evaluate if women still struggle with oppressive traditional ideologies this ethnography will explore the gender power dynamic between male and female power sports athletes.

- To explore the motivations for women's' involvement in power sports.
- To understand why women, want to challenge the traditional ideology within such a masculine domain.
- To explore how traditional masculine sporting ideologies, affect how women that participate in power sports live their everyday social life.
- To examine women's' experience of prejudice because of their choice of sport.

### **1.6 Layout of dissertation**



This thesis comprises of five chapters as well as references. The layout of this dissertation will provide a brief guide to the content of each chapter.

1. *Introduction*. This is the first chapter that introduces the background and rationale to the research and the thesis, aim and objectives are demonstrated in this chapter.
2. *Literature review*. This chapter provides the view on what traditional ideologies are and what is expected of men and women under those ideals in western society. It introduces a definition of how power has been led by men and masculinity for centuries which has led to the oppression of women, and because women have been led to believe that they are the weaker gender they have a distorted view of how they see their bodies. The literature will show that women have to constantly negotiate themselves around fitting the feminine ideal of the time. Whilst many strides have been made for the emancipation of women and, they are able to participate in many areas that were once closed to them, sport is an arena that still fosters sexism and support for patriarchy. This chapter will show that whilst women are infiltrating this arena they are having to emphasize their femininity in order to be accepted as athletes. For the women that choose not to conform to this, their identity is questioned and in most cases their sexual orientation is highlighted and they live with prejudice and discrimination just because they have chosen to do a sport that is not deemed feminine.
3. *Methodology*. In the methodology the research method that was used will be explained and the reasons why I chose to use this method will also be given. Overall aim of the research is outlined and objectives recapped and discussed on how they were met. Thus, the validity of the research methods can be valued.
4. *Main Findings*. In this chapter results of the study will be demonstrated and a discussion of the main experiences of the women will be carried out.
5. *Conclusion*. This chapter mainly is a summary of the experiences of the women in the research and recommendations for future research projects are discussed

# Chapter 2

## Literature Review

### 2.0. Gender ideology

The term ‘Gender ideology’ refers to attitudes regarding the appropriate roles, rights and responsibilities of women and men in society (Kroska 2006). Connell (2002) defines gender as a matter of social relations within which individuals and groups act, and so concludes that gender is a social structure as opposed to being biological. Social structures have resulted in the oppression of women for centuries, principally because women have been defined as being weaker than men. Gender ideologies are a way to police the power imbalance that exists between men and women. Aaltonen (2012) indicates that the idea of feminine and masculine ideologies is outlined from a very early age, we are encouraged to walk, sit, talk and eat in a “feminine” or “masculine” way.

Traditional gender roles that have been created by the people with power, undergird power difference between men and women, by defining masculinity as dominance and strength and femininity as submissive and weak (Levant and Richmond 2016).

The notion of femininity in the western culture describes women as the gentle, weaker sex, less aggressive, less assertive, nicer and more cooperative (McNaughton, 2012). In order to legitimise the idea that women are the weaker sex these ideologies are reaffirmed by men so that they can justify having all the power.

Fortunately, attitudes are changing and women do have more opportunity to seek out avenues that once were closed to them. These traditional ideologies are being challenged in the modern age because women now have the freedom of choice to be able to pursue sports, work and lifestyle choices that they were once forbidden to do leading to a more egalitarian ideology (Zou, 2004; Kroska, 2006; Brewster and Padavic, 2000; Minnotte et al, 2013).

### **2.0.1. Gender Ideologies & Power**

There is a power imbalance between men and women and the conception of power is ever present in our everyday interactions, never more so than in the arena of sport where, not only is it prohibitive, but also enables subversive gender performances.

In 1990, Nicholson reported that in western culture power has been firmly associated with the male and masculinity a dominant group that led to the oppression of women for centuries. Whilst society today has made many strides forward for women to have equal opportunity around working life and sport, women are still trapped inside a legacy, and its core is still patriarchal (Johnson, 2005). The patriarchal society is male dominated, male identified and male centred; it is a society that has been identified by the oppression of women. In most situations women are granted little power or respect, are judged on physical attractiveness more than their performance or ability, confined by glass ceilings, patronised and harassed (Dworkin, 2001; Johnson, 2005). Women in 2017 are still experiencing the inequality in the power imbalance through the social structures that dictate that men are stronger, gender equality in many areas is still not being achieved (Velija et al, 2013). Women experience this inequality through the social status of men, and the fact that through virtually every aspect of modern life men are still afforded privilege and power

(Johnson, 2005). Liimakka (2011) suggests that women as a social group lack power within their bodies and regularly experience body dissatisfaction and objectification.

### **2.0.2. Gender ideologies and the body**

In 1980, Young published a paper that demonstrated socially women experience their bodies as fragile, weak and do not have the capacity to achieve strength. Women were continually told you are not as strong as men and therefore will decide beforehand that any task that involves participation that would appear to make them too strong, most women would give it less than their full effort. Velija et al (2013) identifies that women commonly experience their bodies as weak and vulnerable which enforces social inequality and positions women's bodies as inferior to male bodies. Therefore, women experience their bodies in a gendered way in line with traditional power imbalances. Specifically, McNaughton (2012) outlines that whilst physicality for men is about force and domination, for women it is about pleasure in movement and cooperation. From a very early age traditional gender ideologies outline the fact that women are less able to participate in more physical activities.

Furthermore, traditional societal norms still dictate what is acceptable around how women might look and be presented in society, unrealistic media images of women's bodies that along with consumer capitalism, construct a powerful ideal of the desirable feminine body (Liimakka, 2011). Liimakka (2011) indicates that women and girls regularly monitor their physical appearance to fit cultural ideals of the desirable feminine body which in this modern era is the idea that women should be thin and toned. George (2005) and Markula (2001) include that the past idea of women being ultra-skinny has changed to one that states women's body ideologies must be toned yet skinny, you can be hard and muscular yet sexy creating a paradox for women. While this would appear that women presenting themselves as being more muscular sounds liberating, it is not easy to obtain the new toned slenderness ideal and requires women to rid themselves of all fat through exercise and diet and then train to build the right amount of "sexy, feminine" muscle. This is also highlighted by Krane (2001) who identified that women who appear heterosexually feminine are privileged over women perceived as masculine, this leads many sports

women to emphasise feminine characteristics to avoid prejudice and discrimination. Unfortunately, as Krane (2001) points out women who are perceived as too feminine are then trivialized, leaving them having to carefully balance athleticism with hegemonic femininity. This demonstrates that women are still having to constantly negotiate their way around societal demands of what is acceptable.

### **2.0.3. Gender Ideologies in sport**

In sport women have to negotiate hegemonic definitions of femininity and athleticism which continues to constrict the equal participation and representation of women in today's society. Sport is an area that has a common view of being one of the most gender – traditional social arrangements that fosters sexism and support for patriarchy (Harry, 1995 George, 2005; Dworkin, 2001). In 1995, Harry demonstrated that sport attempts to define and celebrate arenas in which men are superior to women, especially in strength, assertiveness and competitiveness, however women have increasingly entered the fields of the sporting environment in the last one hundred and twenty years. Some examples of these sports that were once forbidden to women are football, rugby, cricket, boxing and weightlifting. Twenty years on and Paul (2015) explores how female athletes are using sports that are seen as a male domain not only to denaturalise and disrupt heterosexist and misogynist discourses but are also using physical activity to challenge heterosexist ideology. Since the study by Harry (1995) there are no sports that women are unable to participate in at Olympic level with Weightlifting being introduced in 2000 and boxing in 2012 thereby challenging the view of sports as an exclusive domain of and for men, the traditional patriarchal roles within sport that were dictated by men are becoming less and less apparent.

### **2.0.4 Gender Ideologies and body in sport**

Traditionally sport has always been defined as a masculine domain where men can show that they are strong, muscular and competitive. Conversely women were seen as too emotional, weak and less able to partake and were pushed towards sports that

were seen as aesthetically pleasing and appropriate for the feminine body like ice-skating, gymnastics, and swimming. These sports were seen as more acceptable for women to be included in as they did not pose any challenges to traditional gender ideologies.

Whilst men's bodies are elevated to a mythical status and viewed in sport as body-subject's women are consistently in sport viewed as body-objects. Instead of being celebrated for being a successful athlete in order to promote themselves in the media, women have to sell themselves as sex objects and are often apologetic about their physical appearance. This can be seen in Fink et al (2014) recent study that found women are still being presented in sexually provocative poses versus highlighting the athletic competence and are still having to negotiate the gendered expectation between being athletic and "appropriately feminine". Entry in to this culture can facilitate empowering body experiences as pointed out by Young (1980) who suggests that sport can give women a new sense of identity, but unfortunately the media plays a powerful role in how women are depicted in their sporting roles. Krane (2001) includes the idea that women can truly be seen as athletes is hindered by the notion that women must conform and define their femininity at all cost for fear of prejudice or discrimination. Women who pursue sport that challenges the notions of what is natural can be seen as asserting a form of resistance to constraining stereotypes of femininity and lead the way in which it is possible to change the idea of what feminine identity means in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **2.1 Identity**

Weinrich and Saunderson (2003) suggest that everyone experiences the desire to make sense of the world that they engage in from time to time and that a fundamental aspect of this process is the striving to make sense of oneself, to comprehend who one is, where one has come from and the kind of person one aspires to be in the future. Mcleod (2008) identifies that people will gravitate towards groups and these groups gives us a sense of social identity, a sense of belonging to the social world, for example being an athlete will associate your identity with being a sports person. He suggests because of these groups we divide

the world into “them” and “us” based through a process of social categorization. We put people into social groups this is known as ‘in group’ (us) and ‘out group’ (them). Social categorization is one explanation for prejudice attitudes if you do not fit the ‘in group’ which can lead to discrimination against people that are in the ‘out group’ just to enhance their self-image. Similarly, Woodward (2004) found that our identities are shaped by social structures and that identities are formed through the interaction of people when people position themselves, and are positioned. Lawler (2008) suggests that it is not possible to provide a single definition of what identity is, and as Woodward (2007) points out we also participate in forming our own identities and that gender, class and culture are also important when trying to define one’s identity, identity provides us with the means of answering the question “who am I”. Therefore, identity is something that we perform as individuals and if you are part of a social group that is not part of societal norms, for example being a strength athlete, as a woman this can lead to challenges with discourses that question who you are.

### **2.1.1 Gendered Identity**

Vantieghem et al (2014) explains that gender identity refers to the extent to which someone feels more masculine or feminine, regardless of biological sex, given what it means to be masculine or feminine in a given society. Societal norms concerning ideal masculine and feminine natures may inform people’s gender identity. Woodward (2004) talks about self – categorization theory when discussing gender identity. The theory claims that identity is shaped by self–categorization. People look at social categories and decide whether or not they are in a category, if people see themselves as a member of a category, that category becomes part of their identity she goes on to highlight key points: -

*“We see people as members of social categories; we also see ourselves as members of social categories; we take on identities appropriate to the social categories with which we identify” (Woodward, 2004; p.47).*

Identity then includes people's notions of who they are, of what kind of people they are, and their relationships with others. It is therefore closely related to the groups and the social categories that they see themselves as belonging to.

### **2.1.1.2 Sport as a site for gendered identity construction**

Throughout history sport has been a setting for the development and display of masculine power and authority. At the same time, women's exclusion from sport or their admission on a restricted basis has been one way in which the myth of female frailty has been able to reproduce ideologies (Theberge, 1993). In 1993, Theberge identified that whilst participation for women in sport had increased, sport remained a setting in which ideas about gender and gender differences were still powerfully constituted and expressed. Twenty years on Beki and Gal (2013) show that women in recent decades have begun to take up types of physical activity traditionally considered masculine and that men have entered into sports that previously were only available to women. With this view in mind sport can be regarded not only as a scene of gender stereotyping, but also a scene of redefining the concepts of masculinity – femininity in the negotiating of gender relations. Unfortunately, as identified by Roper (2013) in our western society there are clear definitions of what sports are appropriate for boys (i.e. football, wrestling and boxing) and for girls (i.e. dance, gymnastics and figure skating). Roper (2013) points out that there is no biological reason why a girl should not play football or why a boy should not take part in figure skating. Unfortunately, due to socially created ideas about what is suitable behaviour for boys and girls, crossover performances in these sports often creates controversy.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century access to sport has greatly improved for women but certain behaviours continue to be considered more or less appropriate for females depending upon how compatible they are with biologically or socially constructed female characteristics (Ross and Shiness, 2008). Ross and Shiness (2008) study of female college athletes highlight the fact that whilst these female athletes have been able to participate in sport from a young age through to college level, they have had to construct meaning around being a young woman and being an athlete, which



demonstrates that female athletes are still having to negotiate their way around being accepted as an athlete whilst trying to remain feminine in order to fit into society's norms.

Huybers–Withers and Livingston (2010) conclude that sport is a leading definer of masculinity in western culture and an institution through which male hegemony is constructed and reconstructed. They suggest that studies of traditional mainstream sports by sports sociologists have demonstrated the role sports plays in creating and maintaining ideas of male dominance and difference from women. Many of the mainstream sporting organisations remain strongly masculine despite the increasing number of women that are participating in sport today. These organisations continue to be gendered through dominant discourses of their members who explain exclusionary cultures and practices in ways that preserve male dominance (Fielding-Lloyd and Mean, 2011). Sport has a long history of being resistant to the entrance of women, deploying powerful gatekeeping practices to protect its boundaries.

## **Chapter3**

# **Methodology**

### **3.0 Introduction**

Driven by a research question that aims to explore the experiences of women that participate in power sports an interpretivist qualitative approach was chosen to investigate the chosen sub-culture. This chapter presents and justifies the methodology adopted, including the data collection methods used. It also addresses the ethnographic process and highlights the strength and limitations of this particular methodology.

### **3.1 Aims and Objectives**

#### **3.1.1 Overall aim**

The overall aim of this study is to understand the experiences of women who participate in power sports.

#### **3.1.2 Objectives**

1. To explore the motivations for women's involvement in power sports.
2. To understand why women, want to challenge the traditional ideology within such a masculine domain.
3. To explore how traditional masculine sporting ideologies, affect how women that participate in power sports live their everyday social life.
4. To examine women's experience of prejudice because of their choice of sport.

### **3.2 Using qualitative research to understand the experiences of women in power sports**

Natural reality and social reality are different. Whilst natural sciences are looking for consistencies in the data to deduce laws, the social sciences often deal with the action and agency of individuals and usually focus on meanings and experiences (Andrews et al, 2005; Gray, 2014). Natural sciences will use survey studies or experimental designs in order to collect data and will have a positivistic approach to their study. Social reality is grounded in the experiences of the people concerned in the study and therefore to gain knowledge of the sub – culture of power sports an interpretivist approach to this study will help me to make sense of the subjective reality and attach meaning to it. A major anti-positivist stance is interpretivist and interpretivist reject positivistic views of science (O'Reilly, 2009; Williamson, 2006; Hennick et al, 2011). Subjectivity and authenticity of human experience is a strong feature of qualitative research. As an interpretivist researcher, I will employ multiple methods in order to reflect the experiences of the women in the research. These methods are based on a naturalistic approach of data collection such as interviews and observations. Based on this approach qualitative data is an appropriate strategy in order to collect my data.

Qualitative research aims to capture meanings or qualities that are not quantifiable, such as feelings thoughts and experiences. Qualitative research allows me to examine and explore the understandings, experiences and complexities of power sports and how the women live and go about thinking, acting and making meaning in their lives (Ellis, 2004). Hennick et al (2011) explains that one of the distinctive features of qualitative research is that it has allowed me to identify areas of interest from the perspective of the participants in the study, giving precedence to their voices. This perspective will reflect a way of viewing the power sports culture holistically and naturistically and will allow me, through the ethnographic research design outlined below, to be in the culture as an involved participant, rather than objective outsider (Ellis, 2004). Unlike quantitative research the issue of “how many” is not relevant when using qualitative research. The ethnographic and autoethnographic approach to qualitative research claims to represent a uniquely humanistic interpretive approach as opposed to the supposedly scientific and positivistic positions (Andrews et al 2005). To understand and makes sense of the experiences of the women in the study cannot be measured through a positivistic approach. This study is about collecting rich, detailed qualitative data from different women and using a constructivist interpretivist approach will determine how myself and the participants engage and understand the world of power sports (Crabtree and Miller, 1999).

### **3.3 Ethnography as a research method to explore the experiences of women in power sports**

Ethnography is derived from the Greek word (ethnos “folk, people, nation” and grapho “I write”) meaning the study of people. The first wave of ethnography can trace its origins to ancient Greece and Herodotus “the father of history” who travelled from one culture to another to document traditions and socio-political practices (Clair, 2003). Clair (2003) identifies another three waves of ethnography that would see anthropologists and sociologists such as Malinowski, Mead, Dubios and Joyce who would use ethnography as a method of enquiry in the early decades

of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century to find out about cultures both in their own settings and foreign settings. Whilst the beginning phases of ethnography concentrated on the colonization of different cultures ethnography has moved to sub – cultures, such as to study sporting sub–cultures.

The aim of ethnography as a method of enquiry is to understand the culture of a particular group from an emic perspective (Egan-Robertson and Willet, 1998). It will enable the readers the real life experiences of the women who are being studied. Ethnography will enable me to attempt to fully understand as much as possible about the experiences that women are facing daily in power sports. The method involves extensive field work and intense familiarity of a group or community through immersion into culture and draws on a family of methods involving direct and sustained contact with human agents, within the context of their daily lives (and cultures) watching what happens, listening to what is said and asking questions (Jones, 2015; O’Reilly, 2009). As I have been immersed as a power sports participant for over 15 years this is the obvious choice as a method to explore the culture. This will allow me to observe events and processes while they occur and because of my time in power sports I have an innate understanding of the people and how the sports operate (Flick, 2009).

Through observation, inferences can be made from how members of a culture act, speak, or think within specific culture context to give meaning to actions and behaviours of the group. The standardized nature of formalized surveys and questionnaires will fail to provide the kinds of data necessary in understanding the culture being studied whereas the lived setting of ethnography demands much more immediacy and intimacy (Sands, 2002).

Research into these sub-cultures can help to capture culture insights and bring forward different perspectives as well as an in-depth exploration of the culture to date and the research data at the time of collection is the definitive word at the time (Gray, 2014). With the shifting of cultural boundaries and ideologies being continually challenged in today’s society, ethnography offers a way to make these changes understandable. Sands (2002) suggests that ethnography is still the most sensitive way to explore the sub-culture under study and make the study come alive for all readers of the research who are interested in making the ‘different’ become

familiar in society. Ethnography no longer requires the researcher to travel to remote villages to study groups of people, in fact everywhere you find humans there is an increased recognition that cultural and social phenomena are ripe for ethnographic study (Murchinson, 2010). Using ethnography will result in a comprehensive, descriptively detailed and conceptually framed understanding of the women in power sports.

My epistemological approach to the research, as outlined above, means that I try to begin with as few preconceptions about what I am studying as possible (O'Reilly, 2009), although acknowledging that past experiences may impact upon the research process (see section 3.4, Reflexivity). There is also the acknowledgement that there are different and multiple truths and multiple realities and I am looking for the participants own experiences, not an absolute 'truth' or 'reality'. With such a study, the data and the experiences of the individuals take precedence through the research making this study more inductive. This study is driven by the data and data takes priority. I was guided through the research by symbolic interactionism, feminism and phenomenology but these theories did not restrict my approach. I dealt with them in a broad enough way that I have let the data take priority and ultimately the data drives my use of theory. The study was an analysis of the different experiences of women who participate in power sports leading this study to be an inductive analysis, there was no one theory that fitted into the study. Social life is 'messy', with no one theory able to describe and explain the complexity of human behaviour within social contexts. As a consequence, ethnographers are less likely to be looking for patterns or regularities and more likely to be interested in the 'messy', complex worlds they are participating in and observing, the ethnography evolves in design through the study. As a result, Jones (2015) suggests that a sports-related ethnography is a very flexible methodology in that data collection is often unstructured, unplanned and even unexpected.

Wagg (2011) explains that the primary strength of ethnography is that it is able to capture meanings of everyday human activities and as a strategy can accommodate changes in ideas and research direction more easily than quantitative methods. Wagg (2011) also includes that the internal validity of observational methods is high in that it verifies the truth of the claim made especially in situations where the researcher

can participate and get close to the data, thus the participant observation data are the key stone of the claim to authenticity. The advantage of adopting this method is that it is appropriate to look at what it means to be a female athlete in power sports in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The overall aim of this research is to ascertain the emic perspective of women who participate in power sports therefore seeking to understand and describe from the perspective of the women who participate in power sports and produce an account that is meaningful to those in the study.

Ethnography has a number of methods attached to it, predominantly participant observation, informal and un-structured interviews all of which were used in this study. However, my own position as researcher and my own experiences within the power sports culture has allowed me to take part in an autoethnographic data collection. Unlike ethnography that requires you to become participant observer, autoethnography has allowed me to retrospectively and selectively write about my own experiences as a power athlete and coach (Ellis et al 2011). Duquin (2000) explains that this method of qualitative research requires me to draw upon highly personalised accounts of my own lived experience in order to extend the sociological understanding of the culture of power sports. These personalised accounts can be written in many ways and can be presented in the form of short stories, memoirs, textual fragmentations and presentations (Purdy et al 2008). For the purpose of this study I relied on short stories that were written in my journal of observations after training, competitions that I attended, and coaching sessions conducted by myself. These inserts were written alongside entries of the ethnography in the journal that I kept. The journal was kept for one year and entries were made as soon as possible in order not to lose sight of what was relevant, every so often the entries to the ethnographic journal lead me to areas where I could engage with my wealth of experience. The autoethnographic data in this study is written from a single perspective, but drawn together with the data collected from the participants of the study. It has allowed me to draw from highly personalised accounts of my own lived experiences as a power sports athlete that will showcase concrete action, dialogue and embodiment (Jones, 2009; Ellis, 2004). Whilst the autoethnography comes first in this study as it is used to enlighten and explain the experiences that I have had and seen of others the conclusion of the research is all about the participants. I have been involved as an athlete and a coach in the culture of power sports for over 15 years

which means that I have an undisputed understanding of these cultures. Unlike an ‘outsider’ who would be looking for gatekeepers to the sub-culture my perspective is one of ‘insider expert’. I have no need for gatekeepers into the sub-culture as I have gained a reputation and respect from within the world of power sports because of the many accolades I have won. I truly understand what it means to be a female strength athlete, unlike an outsider with only a limited experience of the sub - culture. The years of experience that I have in the power sports means I am able to interpret those experiences and understand the participants in the study. The following insert from my journal of observation demonstrates this point exactly

*I have started to approach some of the other female athletes now to let them know that I am doing research and would they participate in giving me some information on their own experiences as a female power sports athlete. I spoke with one woman today that has taken up powerlifting but has also played rugby (not sure if she is still playing it?) As we chatted and I was telling her about my research I said it would be really interesting to get her perspective especially as she has played rugby and myself being a retired full contact fighter, I often got asked Why? Why do you do that, why do you want to get hit?? Of course you wear protection?*

*She agreed that she got asked the same questions about why she played rugby and the usual comments that well of course she must be a lesbian and being really surprised when she attended a night out dressed in a pretty black dress and high heels with make-up on, I mean god forbid we should ever put make-up on!! She had said that the boys were shocked and then pleasantly surprised.*

We both had participated in sports that are deemed predominantly masculine and therefore because of my previous experience it gave me a deeper understanding to her own struggles as being accepted as a female rugby player. I have been able to use my own data to understand and develop the autoethnography but the research is still focused inductively on the participants. The autoethnography has not been done as a separate study it expands and opens up a wider lens to the sub-culture of power sports and will give a deeper understanding and meaningful interpretation of the

study.

The ethnographic methods used in this study were participant observation, informal and un-structured interviews, journal of observation, semi-structured interviews and auto-ethnographic data collection. Participant observation is the main method of ethnography and in order to understand the culture being studied I engaged in an extended period of observation while making mental and then written informed observations. The triangulation of methods used above enabled me to look at the study from different angles. It will provide diverse viewpoints or standpoints to cast light upon the study along with a trustworthiness to the findings.

### **3.4 Reflexivity**

Even though my experiences allowed me to elaborate and explain to generate understanding from an ‘insiders’ perspective, I, as the researcher, had to be careful that I simply did not reinforce my own pre-existing ideas and biases, for example the negative experiences I have personally endured within the world of power sports. I was not looking for a single objective ‘truth’, but my ethnographic and auto-ethnographic immersion within the subculture has allowed me to develop an understanding of this social world. I did have to be cautious because my own history and experience may have biased the journey. I tried to minimise this bias and to allow the participants voices, through the data I collected, to take priority to make sure that I, as researcher, focused on understanding and interpretation, rather than being guided by my own subjective thoughts and ideas.

From my own position the strengths were very much that I knew what to ask and how to understand what it means to be a female power athlete. I was able to fully understand the terminology that is used within power sports along with the subtle language of power sports that an outsider would not know about. The following insert from my journal of observations shows terminology from one of my fighting sessions that only I would know to understand



*“In the fight world I have had a few experiences where men have come and tested me in my sessions that I have been teaching in, one experience was with a man that I used to demonstrate a technique on so that the class knew what they would be doing and in front of the men decided to start to fight with me, I was demonstrating a clinch hold technique (stand up wrestling in Thai boxing) and in my head as it was happening I thought right I am either going to have to let him get the better of me or I am going to have to resolve this situation and deal with him, so I dealt with him. I had to jump up, my feet at one point were off the floor, put my knees into him, get my arms around his neck in to what is called a choke hold, this has nothing to do with Thai boxing but it was the only way I was going to sort this out. I then jumped down on to the floor whilst holding him in this choke hold and pulled it on a little harder so that he knew he couldn't get out of it, he then had to surrender. The guys that were watching applauded the guillotine hold I had on him and then we carried on with the session”.*

A potential limitation to the study could have been that I already had my own view of the likely findings. I was researching a culture I already knew about. It was of paramount importance that I listened when participants spoke and I let them do the talking without guiding them my own way with my own opinion. I made sure in terms of asking open questions, I allowed them to tell their own story rather than me guiding them. My analysis of the data was systematic, I looked for cases that supported but also that went against some of my own view points. It would be difficult not to go in biased because of the length of history I have in the sport, but I let the study take its own path.

I was in a strong position to take on this study because of my expertise in the culture. Had an ‘outsider’ chosen to do this study I feel it would have had a different perspective because of the lack of understanding and knowledge they would have had. I have had experience in three sporting disciplines to a very high level of which a non- participant person would not be able to attain in the time given to pursue this study, they will not have the expertise that I have. The same could be said if the study was conducted by a man. He may very well not have any pre-conceived ideas but from a male perspective he really does not know what it means to ‘walk in a

woman's shoes' as a strength athlete, given that the culture is still very male dominated and seen as a masculine activity.

### **3.5 Using participant observation to understand the culture being studied**

Ethnography has two main research strategies non- participant observation (covertly) and participant observation (overtly) (Atkinson and Hammersley, 2007; Giampietro, 2008). Participant observation is the main research strategy for this study as it involves the researcher taking part in the daily activities, rituals and interactions as a member of the culture being studied, participant observation also enables the researcher the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their routines and their cultures (Dewalt and Dewalt, 2011). Similarly, Giampietro (2008) found that using this research strategy will enable the researcher to establish a direct relationship with the social actors by staying in their natural environment with the purpose of observing and describing behaviour. Atkinson and Young (2012) found that participatory approaches are common in ethnographic research about alternative sport and physical cultures. They illustrate in the study that by participating in the 'doing' of physical culture this can reveal a depth of complexity and understanding of embodied physical experiences that cannot be gleaned from a non- participant stand point.

I was able to observe as an athlete in the beginning phases of collecting data in what was called the "dungeon". This was a very small space where women and men, girls and boys all trained in a very dingy space, no airs and graces in this environment and you could not be afraid of getting dirty as there was plenty of chalk around and dirty rusty bars. Later into the observations I set up my own weightlifting club where I was able to observe in a position of authority really, I was the go to person, so the dynamic of this was very interesting for observation purposes. All through the study I have competed and coached in various competitions that include power lifting, weightlifting and fighting events, all of which have been very interesting to be an observer at, the more power based sports are much more community based whereas the fighting community still has its values very much around male hegemony. I avidly took down notes that were relevant to the study. I took on a more overt

(participant- observation) position when in the training room and gym life. Being part of the daily goings on made for a much more natural interaction with the other members and although they knew they were being observed this did not change how they went about interacting with the me and each other.

When observing the competitions, I took on a more covert (non- participant observation) position in order to watch the cultures and observe the differences between the lifting community and the fighting community, I wanted to get a feel for the differences between the two cultures and observe the dynamics of the men and women in the two environments.

### **3.6 The importance of field notes to the study**

When in the field observing it is important to take detailed notes as soon as possible, preferably whilst you are in the field so as to not lose sight of what it is you are observing, instead of trying to recall the observation at a later date which could mean missing out on valuable data for your study (Jones, 2015). I kept a note book to hand and wrote down what was relevant to the study. Figure one shows an example of the format of how the notes were written, although a limitation to this is that you can lose sight of what is relevant Wolfinger (2002) explains that while in the field, researchers will presumably identify certain phenomena as interesting and worthy of annotation but you should exercise discretion in deciding what should be documented and will have to make sure that you bring yourself back to the question that is being asked for the study. I transferred the notes to the laptop where the information was kept in a safe location under a password so as to keep all the information anonymous.

#### **Figure 1 example of field notes**

*If it is something I have observed is the young men's ability to tolerate the more challenging girls that come into the session. I have noticed that they will talk about them behind their backs but will work with them in the session when*

*they have to. They do not ostracize them. I know in myself that I am less tolerant that's why I like doing the weightlifting as there are not so many girls that are doing it which means most of the time I am on my own.*

*I sound pretty harsh here, why am I intolerant. I am a person that goes out of their way to do things for myself for me. It all comes back to my upbringing, the parents were just not around, do not need anybody to do it there was no point feeling sorry for yourself you just had to get on with what you wanted which can make you hard to life in general. I just do not have the patience to train with women that are needy for attention, even if they have been told all their life they can't do something. I come from that background too and I am not needy for attention and I am somebody that has had no attention given to me so really that should make me want it more, but I don't, I found out early on if you want something you have to get out there and do it.*

### **3.7 Explanation of the ethnographic interviews used in this study**

#### **3.7.1 Informal interviews explained**

I began this research by collecting data in the field using informal interviews. Asking questions is fundamental to ethnographic fieldwork and can be carried out at any time and in any place. Such casual exchanges are essential for it is often in these conversations that people share most freely (Haviland et al, 2014). These informal conversations were always done 'off the cuff' in training sessions or at competitions that I will have been competing at. For example, Helen is a girl of sixteen who was at a power lifting competition, I began speaking to her about powerlifting and she started to tell me about the bullying she received because of her choice of sport, "she hog" and "lesbian" were part of the name calling that she endured at school. Girls and women that choose to do "boy type sports" will endure the social stereo types that are associated to the discrimination that questions your sexual orientation (Howe, 2003) This also reflects the findings of Hargreaves (1996) who points out that women and girls are socialized into behaving in feminine appropriate ways. It was generally when a conversation came up and I thought it was of interest because

it related to current literature that I chose to pursue and gain more information. I did not look for one specific type of person to interview, it was important to listen to all conversations that were taking place and pursue anything of interest to the study.

### 3.7.2 Semi- structured interviews explained

Sands (2002) shows several different methods for collecting data from formal structured and open-ended interviews, informal interviews, life or oral histories, the use of historical sources and collecting cultural myths and legends. For this study I decided to adopt the use of informal interviews and semi-structured interviews as a method for collecting data. Sands (2002) highlights the importance of your selection of people to interview in order to yield good data. I decided to get a cross section of different ages and different backgrounds, this maximizes the diversity relevant to the research question and is referred to as a maximum variation sample (Patton, 1990). I purposely chose women knowing their sporting background but also decided to choose women that had no sporting background and had only been involved in power sports for a short time.

The following table details the interviewees. To ensure anonymity each of the interviewees were given a pseudonym. The second column shows their age which ranges from teenager to women in their late thirties, this covered the age range that was present to me. The third column details their employment status and what their life status is. I wanted to understand their backgrounds and whether or not they were independent. The fourth column details their sporting background. All the women were white British from middle to upper working class backgrounds.

Table 1: Interviewees

Name pseudonym	Age	Employment status	Sporting background
Sam	33	Runs her own property business, book keeper. Has	Played rugby for Wasps women's 1 <sup>st</sup> team has a

		two children. Owns her own home.	background in netball, athletics, weightlifting and powerlifting.
Ashley	24	Personal trainer and sports therapist. Owns her own home	Competed in swimming in her younger years. Took up powerlifting 2 years ago and competes and has recently taken up Thai boxing
Sarah	36	Ward Sister in a cancer unit. Owns her own home.	Small amount of weightlifting at school. Thai boxing for 10 years and now powerlifts and competes in powerlifting
Hayley	22	Teaching assistant and full time student. Lives with parents	No sporting background. Took up weightlifting 6 months ago
Jane	16	6 <sup>th</sup> form lives with parents	Thai boxing since she was 7 years old. Athletics since she was 11 years old. Weightlifting for 2 years

The interview schedule focused upon elements such as why choose power sports? How did taking part in power sports make them feel? How do their friends and family feel about their choice of sport? What experiences positive and negative do they encounter from friends and family or outside of the sport within every day social situations? Do they feel that women have more opportunity to be involved in these types of sports in the contemporary society? Is there ease of entry into the subculture? Do they remember how they felt when they first entered the power sports gym environment?

The interviews took place either at my home or in their home where they felt free to talk with ease. I recorded the interviews on a dictaphone and on my own phone for back-up and then once the interviews were transcribed they were deleted.

### **3.8 I used my own auto- ethnographic data collection to bring my own personal experiences of what it means to be a power sports athlete.**

I have been part of this culture for a number of years. The data collection has some element of auto-ethnography in the ethnography which allowed me to get ‘inside’ of the data, this was not to put over a personal view point but to put over personal

experiences in order to understand the data. For example, one of the respondents who is a power lifter had mentioned the bullying and name calling “she hog”, “lesbian” that she sustained whilst at school, mostly from boys. I as the researcher knew and understood this type of behaviour, I then recounted experiences that I had had at school with a boy that followed me home for 18 months singing “she walks like a man, she talks like a man” this was all because of how I chose to look and the sport I chose to do. Auto-ethnography is a form of self- reflection and is also an approach where the researcher can focus upon their own experiences where essentially the researcher becomes the primary participant and source of data. Using auto-ethnography allows the researcher to explore the context within which those experiences are enacted (Jones, 2015). I collected data about my experiences of being a woman in Thai boxing, powerlifting and weightlifting. In all of these sport choices I play a pivotal role in how these sessions are run and I am in a unique position as a woman because I am the lead coach in all of these situations.

Thai boxing is still a culture that is still very dominated by men and is for men. Women who enter this arena come up against a barrage of discrimination and judgement. This is a sport that I participated in for a number of years; I will be drawing on some of my experiences in this culture for the study. However, the primary choices of sport for the study are power lifting and weightlifting.

The data collected included the personal experiences of myself and was recorded in the field notes. Within ethnography there is a danger of over- rapport and having a lack of objective distance (going native) (O’Reilly, 2009). This is something that I have highlighted through the data collection and understood that my view point was too subjective and needed to take a more objective view in how the data was collected. I realised because of my own personal experiences in my journey as a fighter and in the weights gym that I was searching for the next sexist comment or the next negative experience. My outlook was purely set around writing about that, I realised that it was not all negative and that I needed to take a step back from my own personal feelings and really look at the culture that I was studying. This was really when I started to understand myself as a researcher and grow with the study.

I have been involved in power sports for over 15 years and I have established myself as a key participant within the culture of power lifting, Thai boxing and weightlifting

therefore enabling myself to understand the language and nuances of these cultures. In the process of ethnography, the literature talks about gaining access and finding key informants, this process was not necessary as I have been involved in the culture for the length of time required to be able to take on both being covert and overt in collecting data. I have the role of lead coach in all of the sports in the study, so gaining trust and making sure that relationships with the other athletes in the study were genuine was not an issue, as most of the athletes have had a long standing relationship with myself which enabled the collection of rich and genuine data. In other studies, collecting data could be seen as an issue but because of the length of time I have known all of the participants and my openness as a coach I genuinely feel that this went well.

### **3.9 Explanation of the ethnographic analysis used in this study**

According to O'Reilly (2005) ethnographic data analysis can be a messy business and ethnographers learn to sift through the mass of data through practice and experience. Miles and Huberman (2002) point out that qualitative analysis is essentially about detection and the task of defining, categorizing, theorizing, explaining, exploring and mapping which are fundamental to the analysis role. Angrosino (2007) includes that there is not one formula that can serve for the analysis of data collected in the field. The analysis process started with sorting the field notes and transcripts. Data was then sorted into codes and themes (O'Reilly, 2005).

The strategies adopted to identify and code the data were initial coding and secondary coding. Initial coding was the first stage to the analysis, it involved breaking down the qualitative data into lesser parts. An example of this is a direct quote from the interviews "*Most girls do well their immediate thing is oh, why do you want to do that because they just assume boys do weight training and girls don't do that*" this is associated to the experiences that the women have in power sports. This was done manually. Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) recommend doing your first data analysis by hand, so that you can get a feel of the procedures needed from the hard copy of data.



The secondary cycle method used in this study was focused coding, which involved reviewing the codes from the initial codes and combining smaller categories into larger ones.

“Codes are tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during the study” (Jones 2015, p.276). In order to identify and code the data I used a set of eight different coloured highlighters to break down the qualitative data.

Once you have coded your data you can now look for emerging themes. Themes are an outcome of coding and are not something that is in itself coded (Saldana 2009).

There were eight themes that evolved from first order theme analysis and then this was reduced to five themes from the second order analysis. The finale stage in the analysis is to relate the data to existing literature this will help to identify whether the primary research has generated a new theory, or whether it confirms or opposes the existing literature.

I read the auto-ethnographic data, observation data and interviews manually from beginning to end through twice. This was to really truly understand the data collected and to know the data inside out. As I was reading I started to tag sections that stood out to me and that I thought were interesting. I then started to break down the sections that were tagged and put them under headings and compile them into separate files. In order to separate the different sections, I used different coloured highlighter pens to make it easier to go back to once I had finished going through the data. Once the data was separated into the relevant files I re-read the sections and chose data that gave a depth of understanding to the theme that had emerged from the analysis. This then lead to the five themes that are discussed in the findings chapter.

### **3.10 Ethical considerations**

Everybody within the gym environments was made aware of the study and permission was asked when observing the competitions. All data collected for this study was conducted by myself in an overt position. O'Reilly (2009) points out that a crucial decision for ethnographers is whether or not to conduct their study covertly or overtly. O'Reilly (2009) suggests that most ethnographic studies that are done covertly are rarely justified and should only be undertaken where the overt access is in some ways restricted. In order to collect the data for this study I made every person involved in the study aware that I would be observing them and the training sessions I was involved in. It is important that ethnographers take on the responsibility for their own actions as well as those they may implicate in their research. Each person that was informally interviewed was told beforehand the aim of the research and were informed that they would remain anonymous and contact information was given if they wanted to retract anything that was spoken about. Informal conversations were held away from any groups of people so as not to embarrass them. When carrying out semi-structured interviews the participants were briefed about the research and told they would be recorded, consent forms were signed prior to the interviews (please refer to appendix A and B). They were then made aware that they could leave at any time and their participation was voluntary. All recordings once finished were written within 24 hours and deleted from the recording device. The written up interviews were stored on the laptop under a password only know to the researcher in order to follow strict confidentiality.

Jones (2015) points out that research into social phenomena such as sport can be difficult not to come across some ethical issues. In this study the researcher found no such issues and that all ethical considerations were taken into account before the data was collected for the study to ensure the safety of the researcher as well as the well-being of others that were involved in the study.

### **3.11 Strengths of the research**

You could say that because I have been immersed in this field for over fifteen years I am too familiar with the culture and not able to be objective in my view point. I was able to reflect on this in the study and work at being more objective. Because I have been involved for such a long time has meant that I have brought a wealth of knowledge and understanding to the research. I understand the language in the sport

settings and going native could be a problem. I was able to see very early on in the research that I had to be the researcher and learn to observe and collect information objectively. There was trust and understanding from all that were involved in the study because of the length of time I have been involved in the culture.

### **3.12 Limitations of the research process**

#### **3.12.1 Observation**

I realized as I was collecting my field notes that I was too subjective in my view point and because of personal experiences I had had in my journey in these male dominated environments I was looking for the next sexist comment or next sexist behaviour. I realised that I needed to be more subjective and that I needed to be the researcher that was looking at the whole picture that I was observing. In making this change in my observations it then enabled me to collect information that was more broad and not just focused in one outlook.

#### **3.12.2 Semi – structured interviews**

When listening back to the interviews I realized that my familiarity with the culture meant that I found myself talking too much. I needed to ask the probing questions and let the interviewees talk. I needed to let my familiarity of the culture enable me to understand their language and not project my own.

### **3.13 Summary**

The ethnographic approach adopted in this study enabled the research to gather large amount of rich, in-depth data that was collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews and auto-ethnographic data collection. The limitations of the research may have limited the data collected at the beginning stages of the study but as I have pointed out I feel that I was able to change to a more objective view quite soon into the study and was able to collect a rich amount of data.

## **Chapter 4**

# Main Findings

## 4.0 Introduction

This chapter covers the main findings of the data collected from the field notes, the semi – structured interviews and the auto–ethnographic data from the researcher’s experiences.

This chapter consists of five main themes that were found through the data analysis. The analysis was conducted by sorting, translating and organizing the data into codes and then themes. An interpretive perspective was adopted in order to understand the motivations, thinking and ideas of the social world that is being studied. Table 2 shows the themes that were found.

Table 2 Main Themes identified

Main Themes	Brief summary of theme
Traditional Ideology	Traditional Ideology has clear distinct roles for men and women. It is understood that women’s role in society under this ideology is that of parent and homemaker. Women are also seen as the weaker, more submissive and cooperative of the genders whereas men are seen as having all the power who are strong, competitive and muscular.
Emphasized Femininity	Women now have the choice to participate in a multitude of sporting activities in 2017. Unfortunately, feminine ideologies dictate that in order to be accepted as a female athlete women are having to emphasize their femininity (for example do their hair, wear make-up, paint their nails) to fit the feminine ideal of the time.
Female body awareness	Women who participate in sport are constantly aware of the fact that gaining too much muscle

	means they can be subject to discrimination and prejudice. They also regularly monitor their appearance and feel dissatisfied if their bodies do not fit the cultural ideal of the time. Whilst this may be the general consensus there are women that are pushing through this glass ceiling of muscularity and are embracing the changes to their bodies even if it does not meet the cultural norms.
Empowerment through doing sport	More women are participating in sports that were once solely dominated by men. These women are forging their own ideal of what femininity means and are also expressing the fact that being involved in power sports facilitates empowering body experiences.
Gender identity and gender identity through sport	There are expectations of how girls and boys, men and women should act in society. The arena of sport is where these values are re-affirmed and women are socialized into behaving in feminine appropriate ways and men are propelled into masculine mythical statuses. When women participate in sports that are associated to men and masculinity their femininity and sexual orientation gets pulled into question.

#### 4.1 Traditional Ideology

The following auto ethnographic data collected demonstrates the experiences I have had when trying to participate in the power sports arena and the out dated ideologies that you come up against all the time as a female athlete.

**“I” the researchers journey as an athlete and coach has meant that my position as a head coach in Thai boxing and weightlifting is challenging feminine ideologies that are set out in society. My position in power sports has given me independence that challenges the idea that women are weak and reliant on men in order to**

**succeed: -**

*“I remember a man listening to one of my conversations when I was in the gym and I had not long been doing Kickboxing at that time, I was really excited. I was getting strong in the gym and doing well with the fighting and he interrupted the conversation and said “how on earth do you expect to find a man?” I replied “Do you know what it is going to do, sort the men out from the boys now run along”.*

**The next insert from a Thai boxing training session I was in demonstrates how some men feel that they have the right to choose whether or not women should participate in these arenas: -**

*“I got my focus on stayed away from him moved around so it minimised how much he hit me and got through the round, he said to me at the end “You are not usual woman” I am not sure what that meant I was just glad to be out of there. He then went on to fight with another girl that came to the session she was not as strong as me and had said to her “you want to fight in man’s world then you fight like a man” he then smashed her round the head and left her with a massive welt on the back of her head”*

As stated by Williams et al (1985), sport is an arena for the reinforcement and perpetuation of particular ideologies and my own short stories demonstrated the struggle I had myself as a power sports athlete. My choice in sports and how I chose to live my life meant I was pushing social boundaries which in turn means I could be ostracised. But, I feel I am showing other women if they choose to follow that they too can be successful and strong and challenge the out dated ideas that situation women as weak and submissive.

Gender roles in society are based on biological differences that are reinforced through ideology and social practice (Connell, 2002). Traditional ideology describes femininity as generally being associated with domesticity, nurturing, submissive behaviour, and beauty; it is not associated with being strong which is traditionally

seen as masculine. Sport as an institution is, arguably, one of the most gender – traditional social arrangements which fosters sexism and support for patriarchy (Bryson, 1987). Traditionally, physical strength is associated to men and masculinity and the perception is that men naturally embody physical force (Velija et al 2013). Women that choose to develop physical strength through participation in sports that are still seen as a masculine domain in society are still seen as non-conformists to the idea of what it is to be feminine.

It was interesting to see from the data collected that Jane and Hayley, who are the youngest of all the women I interviewed, have a clear understanding of the historical context of the traditional gender roles that place women in the position of either participating in more aesthetically pleasing sports or are expected to be the ‘stay at home mum’ and ‘produce babies’. They understand the importance of what power sports can do for them and how by being part of the culture will situate them outside of what is expected of them as women.

Jane who is still at school was asked what do her school friends think of what she does

*“Most girls do well their immediate thing is oh, why do you want to do that because they just assume boys do weight training and girls don’t do that”*

Jane referred to the historical context and what women were supposed to do, when asked why, she said

*“I don’t think they are supposed to do anything, it is just the way it used to be what they should have done before I don’t agree with it and it is just that old thing of women their sports is dancing and things like that and the men are the power sports but I think it is good to change that and I think it has changed massively because there are a lot more girls and women doing the power sports like the fighting and the weightlifting”*

Jane, who is studying her GCSE’s, was talking with her friends and identified that there was an expectation of behaviour from the girls, and suggested that

*“Yeah, yeah the girls dancing you bring up dancing their tone doesn’t change but when you bring up weightlifting and their tone changes and they are all confused as to why you do it”*

Jane was then asked what she understood about the idea of ‘traditional roles’, Jane said that

*“You are saying that men are the ones that can go out to work and they are the ones that do all the work and women shouldn’t do that, why shouldn’t they, women now are just as strong as men maybe not physically just because that’s the way we are made but there is no reason why women shouldn’t do the same things as men especially these days’ women are going out to work and doing just as much as men and there are a lot more women doing the sports”*

Hayley was asked if there was still this idea that women should not be in the gym and she noted that

*“I think with ummmm, the women that I know kind of my age so my friends, a few of them go to the gym and do weights in the gym but it’s not weightlifting ummmm, as a sport so I think they kind of, they have access to doing exercise and stuff and ummm, it is quite normal for people to be going to the gym but it is still a bit weird to them that I was doing specifically weightlifting with the bar and as a kind of sport basically ummm, I don’t think I would have actually considered it if I hadn’t actually gone to the first session and seen what it was like”*

When asked why she would not have considered it, she said that

*“Because umm, I’d say the general kind of view that it is not a very feminine thing and I feel that I am quite a feminine person not because I am a woman but because that”*

*“I like, I like it, I like the idea I feel there shouldn’t be rules on what a woman should be doing, ummmm, Like sometimes every now and then I will do something that is like just because it is not what a woman should be doing ha ha ha , like and ummmmm, and I like I like challenging the idea cause I’m not, I’m not like a traditional and set in my ways”*

Hayley was then asked what she understood to be ‘traditional’ she said that

*“Like stay at home and like cook and birth children ha ha ha ha”*

Jane and Hayley are using power sports to challenge definitions of traditional ideology, they want to show that young women can be physically active and not be



defined by traditional ideas that see women as weak or unfeminine through their choices.

Sam is a single parent with two children and runs her own businesses, it is important for her to be independent and strong. To be self-sufficient and not rely on any one which challenges the notion of femininity that is laid out by Jarrat (1990) who states that to be feminine is often presumed to be unresourceful, intellectually inferior and incompetent.

When Sam was asked what the power sports does for her she replied

*“Ah, well number one it just makes me feel good I like the feeling of being strong and you know like well the health benefits that go with it, like emotionally, physically all of those”*

Sam was then asked why it was important to be strong, and why it was important to be independent

*“Ahhhhh, ahhhh, for me it is just trusting your body having faith in your body if you have faith you are more capable you are more able to do things for yourself, it’s that independence I suppose for me”*

*“Ummmm, I reckon it goes back to like you know your natural instinct of being able to feed yourself provide for yourself provide for your children I like, like being able to be capable of doing all of that and the stronger you are the more capable you are”*

When asked why some women did struggle with the idea of being strong she agreed

*“Oh yeah, ummmm, you get the women that like to be provided for, they like the men to have the man’s role and doing the manly things na, I’m not like that I like being able to do all of it ahhh, be like a 100% self-sufficient”*

Sam was then asked whether she thought that these women just fall into patterns of behaviour and just conform

*“Naa, I think it is cultural, I think that it is cultural I think umm, if you look at cultures even our culture there is definitely a stigma between men’s roles and women’s roles and ummm, Then I mean you look at other countries that have different cultures but there will still be a female, male divide ummm, some countries are stronger with it than others”*

Sarah, who is a ward sister of a cancer ward, also stressed the importance of being independent and not having to rely on anyone. She explained that the power lifting had become part of who she was, when asked what the power lifting gives her

*“Ummm, I don’t know just that it’s me yeah, you know I just it’s me it’s who I am”*

*“It is really hard to explain cause it is just become part of my life and part of me it is somewhere I can go and nobody else is doing it and it is individual to me you know it just makes me feel good, makes me feel strong and independent, yeah I suppose independent again you know it is about maintaining my independence without having to rely on other people being who I am not worrying about what other people think you know just being individual and me”*

*“Yeah..it is definitely something that people always ask me about when I am at work and stuff they always kind of say how’s it going and everything and it does give you that sense of man I’ve got something unique going on here, you know they look at me and they go you do what! and it’s like yeah!”*

Kroska (2006) reiterates that traditional ideologies dictate that women’s role in society is that of a parent and nurturing homemaker this means that when women try to infiltrate these male dominated environments they will come up against prejudice from men who think that they should not be there. George, (2005) includes that women who challenge the gender norms, through unconventional behaviour or appearance will frequently encounter devaluation and stigmatization. Within sport, culture gender expectations are constantly perpetuated and reinforced, in order for social norms surrounding femininity to be challenged it is important that women empower themselves to make their own choices about the sports they take part in so that they can define their own version of feminine ideologies (Krane, 2001).

#### **4.2 Emphasized Femininity**

Women that are engaging in power sports are realising the benefits of participating but are constrained to varying degrees of traditional notions of femininity. The following auto ethnographic data demonstrates my struggle with being accepted in this world and my own observations of women that perform the ideals of femininity in this arena.

**I had decided at the beginning of my career in sport that if I wanted to be taken seriously I was not going to present myself with a face full of make-up. The following insert shows the conversation I had with myself as to how I was going to take on being a coach within the power sports arena: -**

*“For myself I have been in jobs where I have had to dole myself up but in the line of work that I do now how seriously would the clients that most of are men would take me? When I am teaching somebody how to fight, making sure that my make-up is on and my hair is done is not at the top of my agenda, the same goes for when you have 150kg plus on your back, lifting and winning or doing my best is at the top of my agenda not how I look!”*

**Subconsciously I was aware in my coaching position that women who perform hegemonic femininity especially in the male dominated environments I was in were not taken seriously and were trivialised and undermined by the men so in order for me to succeed I made a conscious decision in how I was going to present myself. This transcended into my competing as well. I was on my way to a powerlifting competition and was sat in the back of a car where I observed a couple of young girls on their way to a powerlifting competition it was their first competition: -**

*“Competition day, I was sitting in the back of the car this morning on the way to the competition and two of the girls sat beside me were putting on their make-up which of course I found highly amusing, but then after the comp and thinking about why they were doing that, one of the girls is 16 years old and appearance is everything when you are a teenager and the other girl who is twenty it was her first competition. Maybe they were doing that to make themselves feel better, help them with their nerves, if they felt better about their appearance then that would be one less thing to worry about when they were performing in front of the crowd”.*

**Krane (2014) reinforces this idea of women performing femininity unconsciously because they think that by putting their make-up on**

**they will feel better without realising that they are conforming to what society has ingrained in them and that women must fix their natural appearance in - order to be acceptable.**

**The following insert demonstrates the constant inner dialogue you can have with yourself as an athlete to try and fit in. To try and live up to what society has set out as the feminine norms: -**

*“I also find the company of men more comfortable than the company of women. The faffing that some women do drives me crazy I know that I am not a girly girl I never have been, when they were playing with their dolls when I was a kid I was running races to see if I could beat them from a very young age, that hasn’t changed.*

*I have never been a frilly woman, high heels and skirts and all that malarkey. Trainers, jeans, T’s. I can get dressed up if I feel in the mood but that generally is only on special occasions not as an everyday thing and now that I work in sport I spend all day every day in my workout gear, Great. When they talk about women juggling being both strong and feminine why does that have to constitute having to put on make-up, high heels and wearing skirts? I have never been a glamorous woman and I saw a woman today that was done up to with an inch of her life and I thought god what a lot of effort just to leave the house I wonder if she would be able to leave the house like I do just as I am but then on the other hand I do think that sometimes I should make an effort but it feels weird. I don’t feel comfortable with all that pomp on so I go back to accepting myself the way I am”.*

*Tom boy! Where did that come from? I was called that a lot growing up where did it start? Did I mind?? Did it then have an impact on how I was*

*as a young woman?*

The data collected shows that some women are conforming to the ideals of emphasized femininity while others are struggling to be accepted as feminine through their sport choices. The girls/ women in the interviews for this study are not only resisting emphasized femininity but struggle with the concepts that are associated with trying to fit into life outside of their sport choices and do not want to be associated to the idea of being “girly girl” an image type that is associated to emphasized femininity.

Emphasized femininity is derived from cumulative social practices and wider cultural meanings. Dworkin (2001) states that emphasized femininity refers to the most privileged forms of femininity that shift over time in ways that correspond to changes in hegemonic masculinity. Women perform emphasized femininity in order to be attractive to the opposite sex and to fit the feminine ideologies of the time (Kelly et al 2005). Definitions of emphasized femininity include doing hair, make-up, nails and wearing high heels. Women that participate in sport are to varying degrees constrained by traditional concepts of femininity, they have to battle with being an athlete and being feminine. Krane (2014) points out that you can be athletic and strong as a woman as long as you have a heterosexually attractive appearance. Meaning as an athlete you have to perform emphasized femininity to fit into society’s ideologies that surround being a woman.

An informal conversation I had with Clare, a fellow powerlifter who played rugby at a high level, demonstrates this exact point

*“Why!! Why should they be surprised, you cannot play a game of rugby with a full face of make-up on you would look like a twat, excuse my language!! All the make-up down your face with mud and grass stains very attractive”*

Clare had gone to an evening event and met up with some of the male rugby players she trained with sometimes, she decided to put on a dress with make-up. When she arrived the men were really surprised at the way she looked, like it was something they did not expect to see her wearing. Krane (2014) identifies that athleticism and

femininity are contradictory. Women who participate in sports that are deemed masculine in society are then associated to the “tomboy” characteristic which is the total opposite to the hyper feminine “girly girl” whose appearance is about hair, nails and make-up (Holland and Harpin, 2015).

The women in the study refer to the fact that they either do not want to be associated to the typical girl or that they are not a “girly girl”. The “tom boy” image is associated to assertiveness and self-reliance which in a patriarchal society does not fit the feminine ideals of being helpless and submissive (Holland and Harpin, 2015). The statements that they make about not being a “girly girl” is almost like an apology, although they vehemently do not want to fit that ideal they are struggling with the fact that they have to somehow find a way to fit in to society whilst being a power athlete and present themselves as they want to as women.

Jane who is sixteen and still lives at home with her mum and dad embraces the idea that she is different and does not want to be seen as every other girl

*“I guess it’s just about feeling good because I am different I am not... from a young age I never ever wanted to be the typical girl you know obviously being brought up by mum and dad they never wanted to be like that anyway”*

When asked what a ‘typical girl’ was, she responded

*“Ummm. girly, nails, make-up, dresses, that the sort of, that’s the labelled typical girl but that is not how I think girls should be”*

When asked how do you think girls should be replied

*“Well whatever way they want to! I just don’t think that girls that are like that are girls are girls that are into that and then girls that are not are somehow different, we are girls we just have different personalities and we do different things”*

*“I think yeah, it’s, I don’t think, I can’t imagine that anyone, well no one wants to get up an hour early in the morning just to put on make-up I don’t understand who wants to get up at 6am in the morning to look amazing because that’s the way girls are supposed to look according to them so boys have an expectation I think of girls especially at 16, to see a girl going somewhere in tracksuits bottoms like I do you do get funny looks but if a girl is going somewhere with loads of make-up on they don’t”*

Jane was then asked what she thought girls should be wearing

*“Ha ha ha ha ha, Well they shouldn’t have to wear anything there is a typical girl thing that when you see a girl in a dress people just see her as the normal girl whereas if a girl is in trackies that’s not normal I don’t understand why that is not normal”*

The idea of the typical girl can be seen in Malcom (2003) study whose participants were of similar age to Jane and also agreed that the typical girl likes to dress up in nice clothes and does their hair and nails. As with Jane the girls in the study did not want to be seen as a typical girl but they all seem to struggle with how they present themselves. The sport that they participate in are steering them away from the identity of “girly girl” and they are choosing to define their own identity but are struggling with the dominant discourses that outline femininity in the wider society. The study by Malcom (2003) relates this issue of “girly girl” image to being age related to teenage girls. I would argue that all women across all ages who participate in sport struggle with the “girly girl image”. The data from this study shows that Sarah who is thirty- six similarly expresses the fact that she does not fit into the girly girl image

*“I certainly did not follow the traditional roles, my mum would love me to do something less physical and less initially violent”*

When asked why, she responded that

*“Because she just didn’t think it was a very feminine thing to do”*

*“The Thai boxing initially it was something different, it was something unique it was a rebellious thing you know it was going against perceptions that women can’t fight. you know you can’t do this, this isn’t a very girly thing to be doing because you know I’m not a girly girl”*

Sarah was asked what she defined as a girly girl?

*“Oh, pink and fluffy make-up and dresses and doing their nails you know stuff like that it is just not me, Yeah, yeah, ha ha ha ha ha, it is not me at all”*

*“Yeah I am far too independent for that”*

Being involved in power sports for Sarah gave her the confidence to define her own idea of what femininity means to her

*“My body, My strength, My confidence”*

*“Yeah it really does all of that”*

Ashley is a personal trainer and wants to wear what is deemed more feminine clothing but struggles with how people see her as a sports woman. She struggles with friends who will comment and be surprised when she changes from her sports clothes

*“I never know what to say to that it makes me uncomfortable ooo, oh yeah Ashley you’re wearing a skirt for once and I’m like you know that is one comment I get a lot you look different you look more girly and then I’m like I’m going to put my trackies back on just shut up”*

*“Yeah yeah, you know even recently I even thought that I thought shall I put some make-up on today”*

*“And then I was like I am not going to bother with that you know I haven’t got time to be putting on make- up for work and I am doing sport”*

In order to be accepted as a sports woman you have to live up to emphasized femininity ideals

*“Yeah yeah, it is the fact that every time you do do it someone will always comment on it they got to make a comment you know why don’t you just say you look nice today and maybe say it when I haven’t got make-up on as well”*

The participants in the study and myself all have this idea of what ‘girly girl’ is and we are all in one way or another either working against it or struggling with the idea of what that means to us as young and older women. Krane et al (2014) identifies that “girly girls” are considered normal, whereas athletes are seen as rebels or non-conformists. Being an athlete and living up to the ideologies of being feminine can be very confusing. On the one hand engaging in athletic activities is empowering, yet maintaining an acceptable feminine demeanour can be disempowering (Krane, 2014). Dworkin (2001) argues that women of the new millennium are pushing upward of the glass ceiling that define, contest and press current definitions of emphasized femininity which can be seen from the participants who are creating their own images of acceptability but as Krane (2014) quotes Judith Butler who theorizes that western society has specific cultural guidelines as to how females and males should act. This can be seen in the data where the women are trying to push



the boundaries of feminine ideologies laid out by society but struggle with their new identity and the old feminine ideals.

### **4.3 Female body awareness**

The representation of female athletes in the media has a direct effect on how young girls and women's awareness of their bodies that are involved in sport negotiate the acceptable right amount of muscle that is to be gained (Daniels, 2012). Gaining too much muscle is considered masculine and socially unacceptable. The following auto ethnographic data demonstrates a small sample of how I struggled growing up as a young athlete and how I fit in socially as an adult female athlete.

**Whilst western society allows young girls and women to participate in sport that challenges the traditional notions of femininity, there is still a fine line not to be crossed (Krane et al, 2014). As a young girl I had a constant inner dialogue going on as to how I was to fit in. Because of my participation in sport my body was different to all of my friends: -**

*“It was junior school I must have been 9 or 10 years old. I loved sport, I remember one day I forgot my plimsolls I was devastated I started to cry it was the only lesson I enjoyed, oh, that and art! Running, I loved running, running as fast as I could. There was this other girl she was just a bit better than me I always came in second to her but it meant that I was always working hard to catch her, we were the best in our year! We were getting ready one day and a few of the boys referred to my legs as boy legs, I didn't know what that meant at the time but it was the first time at such a young age I had been ridiculed because my body was changing due to the sport I was involved in”*

*“I always thought that about myself as a young girl, I was fat! I was big! Well I was bigger than most of my friends anyway. In my late teens I put myself on this ridiculous diet and got down to a weight that was not healthy I looked emaciated at the time my friends were saying not to lose any more weight but you get obsessed with fat spotting! Targeting certain areas of your body, focusing in on areas of your body that you feel need to lose fat, silly really silly. Fortunately, I had the foresight to educate myself and learn to love all of myself. We are trying to live up to this idea of what is perfect because it is driven home to us that we should have long thin legs, big boobs, big butt, that seems to be the fashion at the moment! Instead we have got to make the best of what we have got and accept the way we were born”.*

**As I have learned to accept the way I look I have embraced my sport choices and the body it has given me. Without it I would not have gone on to achieve the success that I have. Liimakka (2011) shows that various studies have shown that participation in sport and physical activity can increase a women’s physical competence, perceptions of a competent self and feelings of bodily connectedness: -**

*“I was in the gym today and one of the fighters said to me ‘Janine you are looking pretty hench at the moment’!*

*I laughed and said really am I?*

*He said yeah you know like your traps and shoulders are looking pretty big!*

*I laughed again I said I can't help it it is the way I am made!*

*He started laughing and I then said that because of my injury I have been doing some different type of training and then told them what weight I was shifting and thought it was good, the guy that said I looked pretty hench went bashful and revealed that he can only bench about 40kgs. He is a really good fighter as well, a very strong fighter. I had told him I was benching around 85kgs which I think is pretty cool for a woman my age. For the most part I think that most of the men I come into contact with think that it is pretty cool it is only the odd few that have a negative response to it.*

*How did I feel when he said I looked hench, nothing really did I feel unfeminine? No. I have accepted the way I look and know that sometimes that it does not fit into the feminine norm it is a choice for me to do the things I do and I know that I am good at it so why wouldn't I.*

*Times are changing and the waif like look is no longer that attractive, speaking to some of the men at the weightlifting the other night I asked them what do they prefer? A woman that is skinny or a woman that has a healthier look to them? They all agreed that they do not like skinny women.”*

In today's society more young girls and women are involved in sports but are struggling as to how they will insert themselves as an athletic woman into society and still be desired and accepted as a feminine woman. This can be directly linked to how the media represent female athletes who continually sexualize women rather than celebrating them in their chosen sport. A tight toned body is acceptable whereas an overly muscular body is deemed masculine and will come up against sexist and heterosexist prejudice (Krane 2014). The over sexualisation of female athletes in the media can affect how young girls and women react to their bodies as their bodies change with sport they fear becoming too muscular (Daniels, 2012).

An informal conversation I had with Stacey a rugby player that was coming to the weightlifting demonstrates how girls and women regularly monitor their bodies and will feel dissatisfied with their bodies if they do not fit the cultural ideal of how a women should look

*“We had a group of rugby girls in tonight at the weightlifting and I was having a conversation with one of them. She had asked me how to get her legs trim. She felt that she can deal with her upper body but she couldn’t get her legs smaller. She told me she use to do a lot of cycling and it gave her big legs”*

The latest body ideal for women is centred on having an athletic body type but as the data shows myself and the participants are constantly aware of the fact that having the precise amount of muscle adds a tricky dimension to this body ideal. Dworkin (2001) points out, there is a glass ceiling of the right amount of muscle that women can obtain in order to be socially acceptable. Too much muscle and you sit outside what is seen as the gender order of what is an acceptable size for women to achieve.

This can be seen with Ashley’s friends who do not participate in power lifting and worry about Ashley getting too big and muscly. When asked what her friends think of what she does she answered

*“some of them ask annoying questions like are you on gear and stuff it is just naive, just naive comments”*

*“too muscly ahh that’s not good is it it’s it’s just their opinion, you don’t want to get too muscly”*

When asked why they think that she replied

*“Probably a little bit of jealousy if I speak to my partner about it he says that’s like a lot of people and if it has upset me someone saying something like that he will just say well they’re probably jealous but you’re going out there you’re doing your thing and they are doing nothing, going to work and coming home”*

It is positive to see that Ashley’s partner is supportive of her choices and tries to reassure her but really Ashley’s friends are caught up with traditional feminine ideologies of how a woman’s body should be represented in society. George (2005)

identifies that not wanting to become too muscular is a sentiment that is often expressed by women.

This sentiment can be seen with Sam who was participating in a group of women and there was a general consensus that the women would not do upper body work because they did not want to get big and bulky. Sam disagreed with this. When asked what kind of responses she gets when she tells people that she participates in weightlifting she replied

*“Mostly ahhh, surprise like they don’t believe you and disbelief you can’t be a weightlifter because preconception of what a weightlifter looks like I don’t look like a weightlifter”*

When asked what does a weightlifter look like? What is a preconception of a weightlifter?

*“Ahh, probably that they would tend to be, like they would think of types like, like a cartoon, like hulk, you know muscly, over developed muscles and big like that and they would and the general perception of people that lift weights more so from people that have never done weightlifting which tends to be more women for instance last week I was doing a gym class with some other women and ahhh, we ended up having a conversation with what we wanted to get out of it with this that and the other and ah, every single woman had a general consensus that they did not want to do upper body work because they did not want to get too bulky which is a complete myth you don’t get bulky from doing upper body work and so it is done to body type and I felt in that situation I disagreed with them I was the only one saying well no I want to do upper body work because I want to get stronger and fitter”*

*“There is something about women getting muscly that women don’t want to get muscly”*

As Dworkin (2001) highlights the ideologies in today’s society are encouraging women to not fear the weight room but engrained traditional notions of femininity mean that when women participate in these male arenas they are constantly caught up with their own body awareness of what their bodies in fitness should do. Whether it be in the gym or in a sporting environment that is deemed to be masculine, women are continually policing themselves and trying to balance the perceptions of not becoming too masculine with their own feminine appearance.

The body awareness does not always fall to being too muscular for some women the inner struggle is related to a lack of power in relation to their bodies. An idea that is manifested in experiences of bodily alienation and insecurity. This can be seen with Hayley who always believed that she was just her brain and that her body was useless that she wasn't capable

*“Ummm, Well, my job is very much academic and my whole mind set is academic I went to school and from a very young age I was told that I was clever academically so P.E teachers didn't expect much from me”*

*“So I have kind of grown up with lots of school work and lots of brain work and then in my job in my teaching I do lots of brain work ummm, and do a lot of work for preparing for Uni is a lot of brain work still ummmm, so when going to the weightlifting it is a completely different ball game ha ha ha”*

Hayley was asked how that made her feel that she was using her body in a different way

*“I feel more comfortable in my own body like yeah cause I feel like I do actually have some control over it because I am a bit clumsy usually and I have never been graceful or anything I tried ballet when I was younger and I couldn't do it at all ummm, so it feels nice to be able to do something physical because it is a change and because I need to kind of look at my body in a different way and realise that it is not completely useless”*

*“Well I normally think it's a bit useless it's my brain that's the good part but actually I feel quite, I feel like I can do things and feel that I can be strong and uh. ha ha ha, I feel like I like my body ummm, and ummm, it is not useless! it can do things if I push it a bit”*

Hayley is a prime example of the fact that young women's accounts of positive body experiences are often related to physical activity and through her participation in weightlifting she has gained a self-assuredness and awareness that has allowed her to see her body in a whole new perspective.

Myself and the participants in the study are challenging the social conceptions and conventions and as Paul (2015) points out are pioneers who continue to be involved in the power sports even though it goes against gendered and cultured grains. We are pursuing our right to be involved even when cultural conventions dictate we do not belong.

#### 4.4 Empowerment through doing sport

The following auto ethnographic data reiterates what Bryson (1987) pointed out in his study, sport is of vital personal importance to many women, and definitely to myself. Being involved in power sports not only has given me a great deal of enjoyment over the 22 years I have been involved but it has also contributed to my own sense of identity and acceptance of ‘who I am’ as a female athlete. It has also given me a great deal of competence to achieve in every aspect of my life.

**I struggled in my early twenties to believe in myself and was painfully shy but with the involvement of the martial arts and power sports I was able to develop my confidence. Velija et al (2013) identifies that sport can be physically empowering for women, especially sports that enable women to experience force and power: -**

*“I was speaking with one of my clients and we were discussing my research and talking about woman that go in to weightlifting and powerlifting, she had said that it takes a special kind of woman to go into those types of sports, I must go back and ask her what she means by that but it got me thinking about when I first started at the gym. The fact that it is like second nature to me now big muscly sweaty guys lifting big weights does not intimidate me, there isn’t much that intimidates me now. Meeting ‘posh’ people intimidates me but being in a very male dominated environment I am completely comfortable with. There are a lot of woman that do not want to come into the gym because they are intimidated by the men that go there. Big hairy (Why always hairy, ha.?) sweaty men grunting around the weights area, boxing gyms where the men are punching and kicking the pads or rolling around on the floor sweating profusely; I understand can be very intimidating for most women. If I am honest it wasn’t always like that for me I did use to be painfully shy and lack a lot of confidence I remember when I first started at the gym I made sure that I went first thing in the morning when I knew nobody was around, I did try to go*

*on a Sunday afternoon one time I remember walking up the alley way and hearing the men working out and the weights being dropped and thinking I can't go up there, I did not have the confidence to go up so I went home. I was 22 years old, I did go back and I did start to go when there were other people around. Before I knew it I was training with a training partner who was a man and I was naturally strong so I think at the beginning I was a project for some of the men I was working with to see how strong I could get, it is now 19 years later and I have not looked back my confidence has grown over the years and it is the most natural place in the world for me to be in. The same with the boxing gyms I first stepped into an all-female kickboxing club in Sunnyvale, California. It was less intimidating because it was all women I was there 3 years I knew I loved the physicality of the sport and I had an abundance of aggression and was strong so fighting was easy so my confidence grew. When I returned home I knew I had to continue with this sport and was recommended a club in Bournemouth it was a full contact club and full of men, it was the next step up, I started in the beginners' class, eased myself into it. The beginners did have women in it but they just were not built the same as I was and soon I was working with the men because I was too strong for the women to work with. I did not go straight up to the advanced sessions I had to be pushed to go because again I was still struggling with my confidence, of course I ended up going and the men that were in the session were nice to me but also pushed me and the rest is history. I have been teaching men to fight for over 10 years and still to this day find it amusing when it is a full class of men and me a woman; is teaching them how to fight.*

*I suppose my point is that I have had to work at my confidence and it isn't something that was the most natural thing for me to do, I fell into both sports just by accident really and by doing so has developed my strength of character to deal with tough situations that most women shy away from, I embrace and go into head on.*



Paul (2015) identifies that women that participate in sports that historically are a masculine endeavour challenge the hegemonic masculinity which sports promotes. Both myself and the participants of the study are working towards developing physical power that challenges the concept that women are physically weak. The participants of the study have expressed the fact that being part of the power sports culture has facilitated empowering body experiences that has enabled them to challenge the belief systems that women are weak and docile. This belief transforms the participant's consciousness and bodies through exercise that is more physically demanding to believe in themselves to go on and achieve in their life outside of the sport

I wanted to understand what attracted the participants to power sports. When Ashley was asked what drew her to the powerlifting she answered

*“Ummm, probably the sort of empowering side of it yeah just like the fact of being able to control what I do it is only me that is going to get that weight off that floor no one else just me and there is no limit to strength it is intriguing”*

Through the development of physical strength Ashley is able to harness mental strength that gives her the confidence to pursue other positives experiences outside of the sport. Ashley expresses

*“Do you know what I think that it is probably I think with powerlifting it has given me a lot of confidence in thinking that I would probably not have gone on courses or going away on my own doing it knowing it is almost like a similar feeling of when you get back that you have done it and only you have done it and that it has given me more confidence”*

Ashley was asked if she would ever give up power sports, she replied ‘no!’ when asked why? She replied

*“For me it would be, no it is just a feeling that you get from doing power sports, if I am doing the boxing and things like that that feeling you can't beat it, you can't pay for that feeling”*

I wanted to understand what that feeling was Ashley was experiencing and also where the empowerment that she feels comes from

*“Well it’s just happiness feeling like powerful and like feeling in control of your own life and it is also the mental health side of training cause if you have got aggression in you... you have to have an outlet rather than sitting at home and worrying and thinking about things you can just get rid of it so for me I would never not do it”*

*“I think it is just a feeling that you get from it from knowing that you have worked hard to get to that level and then only I have done that so only I can pick it up and put it down again and it is the fact that it is empowerment of that there is no one else that can do that apart from me. No one else can lift that weight, well they can obviously but no one else is going to help me do it so I suppose it’s like, knowing you can do it”*

Historically women have always been positioned as the weaker sex, the less capable and more fragile (Bryson, 1987; Theberge, 1987; Musangeta and Muchetere, 2012; Velija et al, 2013) . Ashley and myself have shown from the data collected that not only are we capable of being strong but that being involved in power sports enables us to embrace a perception of empowerment that rejects traditional notions that women cannot be successful and more independent in their social life. This can also be seen with Sarah who is a petite woman who, when she first moved to the area, did not really carry a lot of self-worth. The realisation of physical strength that she gained through participating in the Thai boxing and powerlifting enabled her to reject the weak passive female body, a form of embodiment that she will have been used to embodying prior to her involvement in the sport (Velija et al, 2013). She realised that through being a part of the power sports culture has made her understand that it does not matter about her size, she can do anything. When asked if she felt like that before or was it a direct result of the powerlifting she replied

*“No, no it has given me confidence if you like but I was always a very small quiet person even at school and stuff I kept very much to myself and everything and I think that it is only over time you know I gained confidence through my work but I think that the Thai boxing and the powerlifting has really kind of proven that there is nothing that is going to stop me cause I always use to judge myself you know I would always think I can’t do this I can’t do that”*

Sarah was asked where that lack of self- belief came from

*“I don’t know I think just I have never been somebody that has really believed in themselves even when even as a kid”*

Because Sarah lacked the self-esteem to believe in herself she spent most of her time trying to measure herself up to everyone around her even to the point that she referred to herself as ‘crap’

*“I think coming to the Thai boxing classes I think it helped me to realise that there is a life outside of work and that there is activities outside of work that I can do and as crap as I was at it I really enjoyed that”*

Even though the Thai boxing helped Sarah see that she did have the ability to do an activity that was completely outside her comfort zone there was still this belief in herself that she was not good enough. It was not until she found power lifting that she started to really believe in herself and gain a sense of self-worth which has led her to believe she can do anything. This can be seen in Velija et al (2013) study of women that participated in martial arts. The study found that when women engaged in physical strength classes alongside the martial arts this enabled them to reject the position of being weak. Once they were able to feel that they were physically stronger they were able to harness the psychological empowerment which is vital in women’s liberation (Velija et al, 2013).

*“Now I don’t think oh god I’m rubbish I can’t do this cause I know that I can do what I can do but you know back then it was very much a judgement on myself and on my insecurities and my inabilities whereas now I think I have gained that confidence to think I’m doing what I’m doing doesn’t matter what other people are doing I am doing it for myself and not for anybody else you know it is not about proving myself to anyone now you know”*

*“Yeah confidence, yeah not thinking that I can’t do things you know I I really don’t think I would of umm I would have gone on to progress in my career if*

*I hadn't done the sport because that has given me the confidence to realise that I can do things you know that I am not this weak mild person you know I'm you know bloody hell I am ward sister now which I never would have envisioned doing when I was first started out and all the way along they would say in my appraisals they would say about stepping up and I would say oh no, oh no but as time went on I kept thinking you know what I can bloody do this, Yes. And I think it is training and doing the classes and doing the weightlifting that has given me the inner confidence to think there is nothing that can stop me now"*

I asked the participants what the sport has done for them. It was clear to see that the realisation of physical strength and force enables them to reject the weak, passive female body and power sports is one of the arenas that the participants are using to emancipate themselves (Howe, 2003). More and more women are participating in the more traditionally seen masculine sports such as powerlifting, weightlifting and boxing/ Thai boxing and experiencing the benefits of what it means to be part of these more physically demanding sports. Paul (2015) study of women in sport with heavy physical action identified empowering experiences of physical empowerment and growth in confidence that carried into the women's world of work. Liimakka (2011) also suggests that women who participate in sport experience increased confidence in their bodies. The participants in this study are embodying power and strength in a manner that challenges the outdated definitions that position women as weak and passive (Dworkin, 2001)

#### **4.5 Gender identity and gender identity through sport**

Visibility of the strong female athlete in society is not such a rarity in 2017 and it is far more acceptable now for women to be tough and get sweaty (Anonymous, 1998). Unfortunately, that was not always the case and the following autoethnographic data charts my journey as a young female athlete. Being labelled a "tomboy" because I chose to do "boy type" sports and being referred to as a man growing up was an everyday occurrence.

<b>Chu et al (2003) points out that women who refer to themselves as</b>
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**“tomboys” are actually reinforcing rather than challenging hegemonic male/ female power relations. Growing up I know I was labelled a “tomboy” and did not really understand the implications associated to the name and would refer to myself as a tomboy on numerous occasions:-** *“Tom boy! Where did that come from? I was called that a lot growing up where did it start? Did I mind?? Did it then have an impact on how I was as a young woman?”*

*I struggled in my teenage years I know that, struggled with my identity”.*

**The fact that if you are a girl or woman that chooses to do power sports you are considered to be unfeminine and the unflattering, negative label that is still used to identify a female athlete as a “tomboy” reaffirms the fact that sport is the most masculine – male identified institution in western culture (Adam et al, 2005; McIntosh, 2009; Anonymous, 1998).**

**Not only was I referred to as a “tomboy” growing up. My sexual orientation was always pulled into question. The social stereotypes that are associated to women and girls that choose to participate in sports meant that I had to endure and deal with name calling and references to the fact that I was not a female (Howe, 2003): -**

*“One boy for 18 months followed me home from school and sang to me “she walks like a man” “she talks like a man” everyday! It was pretty awful, the same boy recruited some others and in the playing fields there were these huts that stored all the football gear and such like, they were pretty big huts and all the kids of the school would walk past them on the way into and out of school. I was walking in one morning and they had plastered the whole side of the huts with graphic pornographic pictures, the whole side of the hut I couldn’t believe it with “Janine wishes”, did it hurt me looking back I know that I brushed it off at the time and actually went back up to the huts at night time and put a massive drawing on the hut with the boy’s name and “said that he took it up the arse” I didn’t even know what that meant at the time but I know that it made me feel better”!*

**Fortunately, the prejudice and discrimination I experienced growing up**

**did not stop me pursuing my journey as an athlete. I pushed forwards and have lead the way in showing other young girls and women that they too can challenge the outdated claims of women's and girls' body identity and capabilities (Weaving, 2014). Whilst I was choosing to pursue my path as an athlete I did not realise that I too had become part of reinforcing the gender identity of what men and women should be behaving like. The following insert demonstrates how I had fallen into reinforcing outdated ideologies that see women as weaker. I try to reflect on my own coaching practices all the time now: -**

*“I was in the gym the other day and made one of my throw away comments again!*

*I referred to another man as an old woman because he is somebody that always makes up excuses as to why he cannot do certain things. Now, does this then translate into being an old woman, well if I was being flippant I would say that when you have been in the fitness industry for as long as I have you have seen all the excuses in the world for why people can't exercise and they are usually coming from people that are overweight and a little bit lazy in my opinion that is why they are overweight in the first place in most instances and the reason they have the excuse is because they are overweight. The demographic for this group of people generally fall on middle aged women (and some men) so the comparison was made, on the other hand I need to reflect more on how I speak, I was in the fighting gym the other day and a young instructor was training another man and he was kicking the pads. He was not working hard enough for this instructor and he then said “you are kicking like a girl”. “Obviously trying to think about what he had just said. I realise on hearing him using that term that it can*

*come across badly because of course not all girls kick like girls, there are some very good martial arts women out there that can really do some damage”.*

*“I have to be more mindful of what I say but also you have to grow thick skins if you are going to survive in these types of environments, they are not for the faint hearted and not for the over sensitive. Sometimes you just have to just put up and shut up”.*

Gender refers to society's expectations about how we should think and act as girls and boys, women and men. These expectations are prominent in society but nowhere are these values learnt more than through sport where dominant norms of society are re-affirmed and women and girls are socialized into behaving in feminine appropriate ways (Huybers – Withers and Livingston, 2010; Hargreaves, 1996). When women do try to access these more traditionally seen masculine sports it still comes with a level of surprise that they are actually participating in them and also can achieve a level of competence with the activity because it goes against the feminine ideologies of women being weak and passive. The following insert from Sarah reiterates this

*“I think we have got, it’s better I think there is a lot of stigma attached to this kind of sport I still think you know otherwise you would not get the reaction you get when you talk to people about the fact that you do powerlifting and you know they still naturally go ooooo really, then when you know when you try and explain about it they go oh ok, they don’t associate with the gender at all they still see it as a strong man competition and at the Olympic games it is predominantly the men that are on the telly you don’t see the women doing their strong women’s competition it’s all men it’s still that barrier”*

Previous studies have found that social ideologies dictate that men are naturally more aggressive and competitive and women are just not biologically made to participate

in sport that is physically demanding (Ross and Shiness, 2008; Moscoso – Sanchez, 2008; Schmitke and Franklin, 2005; Huybers – Withers and Livingston, 2010; Malcom, 2003; Hargreaves, 1996). It is therefore seen that men are better at sports than women in society, this then suggests that these are inherent conditions that are unchangeable. Fortunately, in 2017 more and more women are participating in these more physically demanding sports and attitudes are slowly changing. Pfister (2010) points out the mere authorization of women in sports that are deemed a masculine arena does not mean that gender differences are eliminated. But as more and more women are seen in these environments these outdated gender differences will be broken down.

The following insert demonstrates that Sarah is helping towards breaking down these gender differences when she shares with her peers that she is a powerlifter. Sarah explains that she is met most of the time with surprise and judgement. Sarah is a small woman of only 5'1, her peers find it hard to understand that she can participate in powerlifting because of society's association of powerlifting only being for big strong men

*“I think it's that judgement isn't it cause I am a small person they think or automatically judge you in that you are weak and feeble and that you know there is nothing you can't achieve big things in life you know ummm”*

*“Ummm, most of them run or do a bit of swimming none of them have chosen any kind of you know what they would think of as manly sports because they, they well a lot of them are surprised at what I do they still see it as a manly kind of thing to do and it's like really “you do what!” you do power lifting? yeah! I think they kind of like oh, really it is not a natural sport for a girl because I am small they naturally think that maybe I would be a runner or swim or something like that ok I wasn't expecting that with the size you are”*

Whilst the involvement for women in sport has climbed, the social construction of athleticism nonetheless marks sport as a predominantly male activity. This arena is a place where men can demonstrate not only their privilege to be there but they also hold all the power (Adams et al, 2005). Ashley demonstrates this point she shares a



couple of experiences where the men assume not only that they are better than her just by them being male but also that she does not belong in the gym lifting weights just because she is female

*“Ok, Negatives is I have been benching one day and been told a woman shouldn’t be lifting that weight I just let the comment go ummm, I have been told just sat there a couple of weeks ago a guy said to me we were talking about the speed ball and ummm, and he like said do it, I was treating a guy at the same time and he sort of started laughing and joking you you know giving a bit of banter and he was like I can do it better than you like on a speed ball and I was like have you ever seen me do a speed ball and he was like but you’re a girl so I will be better than you and I was thinking challenge accepted and then he forgot that I did a bit of boxing and he was like oh yeah you did a bit of boxing and he forgot that , I thought how dare you what because I am a girl!”*

Ashley is one of many women that are showing by being involved in sports that are more physically demanding, will help to break down stereotypes that hold women back and lead the way for other women to develop autonomy and self- definition. Unfortunately, because of the general consensus held in society that if you participate in these sports you are seen as unfeminine and your sexual orientation is also questioned as I found in my own autoethnographic data collection. This can be seen with Sam who experienced this when she played rugby.

*“Ummm, mainly probably the most common one I have had from men they have said to me I must be gay and that it goes straight towards my sexual orientation and or comments which like that are overtly about your sexuality but more ummm, that you are un-feminine in some way so that is the most negative. I get more positive from women than I do from men, men come up with the negative ones and usually generally you are fitter and stronger than them and it will be the ones that feel that you are challenging them”*

Sam played for one of the top women’s rugby teams in England and when she explained that she played rugby the men that she would talk to about this fact would often not believe that she played

*“Ohhh,, again disbelief always disbelief you’re not big enough to play rugby they, they kind of had a hang up particularly and ummm, and then when I would say no I do play rugby and then it would be like the assumption that all the other players were massive, that’s women and men regardless and their preconceptions if you play a sport like that you can’t look normal whatever their normal is ummm, which is a load of rubbish because you get fitter and stronger and a female rugby player would be no different to a female 100 meter sprinter but yet 100 meter sprinter is seen as being feminine and acceptable but if you play rugby for some reason you are likened to the incredible hulk just because you have the title of being a female rugby player umm, when there is actually no difference to create that body”*

When asked if her experiences when she was playing rugby differ from powerlifting or were they the same when you would tell people you were a weightlifter or powerlifter she replied

*“No I would say it was the same as the weightlifting and sort of you know the response umm, I don’t probably its more I think rugby because it is a contact sport people will like and also tend to assume that you are really aggressive but I expect that you get that with boxing people tend to assume that you are really aggressive and if you don’t come across like that that is also quite confusing because it is a heavy contact sport you have to throw everything in to it I mean I think for me in rugby umm, was the ultimate test of fitness, it was the ultimate in power, stamina it tested you mentally in the skill and the understanding of the game you know thinking up in your head like getting your body to always be at 100 percent every time”*

Rugby is a culture that is inherently surrounded by masculinity and misogyny and any woman that decides to participate is constantly met by prejudice and ridicule. This type of behaviour can also be seen in the power sports culture (Howe, 2003).

After I had switched off the tape recording Sam continued to talk about the fact that she had a twin sister and although they were both into sport she definitely had the identity of being a “tomboy” a label that is banded around for girls that choose to step outside what is deemed feminine choices (Anonymous, 1998). Whilst her twin sister did everything she could to stay within the feminine confines Sam wanted

bigger choices, she wanted more, something that was going to challenge her physicality and because of that was branded a “tomboy”. With that branding she struggled with being feminine and trying to identify herself as being a girl until later in her adult life where she has learnt to accept her choices and is more at peace with who she is.

Women in 2017 are not stigmatized as freaks for entering into sports that were once exclusively for men, but because of the entrenched ideologies that still see these sports as a masculine domain means that women are either questioning their own identity and how they fit in but also in a social context their feminine identity is pulled into question. This can be seen in the next insert where I was at a powerlifting competition in 2015 and decided to have a chat with one of the competitors Helen who was 16 at the time to see what her experiences were as a powerlifter and to see if they were similar to mine at school

*“I had an informal chat with a 16-year-old girl later on in the competition and asked her about what her school friends felt about what she does and she replied that she had a lot of bullying, name calling like “she hog”, “lesbian”, I asked if that came from her friends and she replied no that most of it came from the boys at school”*

It is unfortunate that still in 2015 young girls were still having to deal with the prejudice and name calling just because they choose to do a sport that by some people’s standards do not fit the feminine ideal. Throughout my life my identity has been questioned and because of my choices of the sports I have participated in has meant that prejudice towards me has been a re-occurring theme. Fortunately for me I am a fighter and it just makes me stronger. I know that Helen went on to become a British and European junior power lifting champion which means that she too has not let the stigmatization bother her.

The women and girls in the study are using power sports as an arena to emancipate themselves through challenging masculine/feminine dichotomy, which is associated to sport (Ross and Shinen, 2008). The dominant discourses that question women’s femininity are common, the research shows the women’s involvement in power sports can empower but they are still having to negotiate societal expectations of

what femininity means. These hegemonic values are so deeply engrained in western culture that they are rarely questioned (Krane 2001). Krane (2001) points out that society scrutinizes and marginalizes individuals who engage in cross-gender role behaviors and whilst these women are leading the way for other women to get involved in these sports society has a long way to go before it is truly accepted.

The findings of this study confirm that sport is still an arena where gender expectations are constantly perpetuated and reinforced. The participants and myself have all encountered the legacy that power sports are still surrounded in male hegemony. Fortunately, because women now have the freedom of opportunity to participate in this arena they are working towards challenging what the social norms are surrounding femininity. The women in the study and myself are defining our own version of what feminine ideologies should be. The social discourses that outline women looking and behaving in a certain way is understood by the women in the study but the findings show that they are creating their own image of how women athletes should be represented and are not pressured into following such discourses of the feminine ideologies of the time that dictate how they should be presented. They are choosing their own feminine identity. The findings also show that being involved in power sports empowers women in having a positive body experience and also works towards them rejecting the idea that they are weak and less able. This in turn gives them the confidence and independence to believe that they can gain physical strength but also transcends into every aspect of their everyday life and work.

Unfortunately, whilst there are many positive aspects that the findings have produced for women being involved in power sports. For women who do choose to participate in these sports they are still scrutinized as to why they would want to be involved and also their sexual orientation is still questioned purely because having strength and wanting to be strong is still associated with being a man and masculine. Although there is a long way to go for societal expectations of femininity these women and myself are still choosing to lead the way to show that other women can do it to and work towards changing societal perceptions that being strong is not solely associated to being male.

# Chapter 5

## Conclusion and Recommendations

### 5.0 Introduction

This study focused on the diverse experiences of five women and myself who all participate in power sports. In the study I explored why the women chose to do power sports, and their experiences of participation. I explored how being involved in power sports impacts on their everyday life and also how it facilitates their experiences inside and outside of the culture. The experiences were addressed through interviews and observation of the women and the researcher. Both interview questions and observations enabled rich relevant data to be collected for the research aims and objectives.

This chapter will summarise the main experiences of the women in the research and recommendations for further research will be made so as to highlight areas to be developed.

### 5.1 Summary of main experiences

Four objectives were set out to achieve the aim of this study these were;

- To explore the motivations for women’s involvement in power sports
- To understand why women, want to challenge the traditional ideology within such a masculine domain.
- Exploring how traditional masculine sporting ideologies affect how women that participate in power sports live their everyday social life.
- To examine women’s experience of prejudice because of their choice of sport

All four objectives were met and explored. The themes that were identified in the data show that women are still having to negotiate traditional gender ideologies. As power sports athletes they are defining their own idea of what femininity means but are struggling with the fact that in order to be accepted you must emphasize your femininity. Their gender identity is still questioned out of the culture of power sports but, inside of the culture women are embraced and encouraged by everyone that participates. Not only in the gym environment but also when the women compete. The study did highlight that women who choose to take up strength sports have an overriding feeling of empowerment from participating in the sport. They feel that they can conquer anything in their life and in the gym.

The study identified five main themes the following table shows these themes

Table 3: Main themes

Traditional ideology	Emphasized femininity	Empowerment through doing sport	Female body awareness	Gendered identity and gendered identity through sport
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These themes in real life cross-over, they overlap, interact and impact upon each other. Meaning, the women in the study are dealing with these issues at some point when participating in power sports. The key themes arising out of the study were identified through the women’s experiences in power sports.

## 5.2 Summary of key themes

The study shows that more women are working towards creating their own script of what femininity means to them but, are struggling with societal demands of hegemonic ideals of femininity. This reflects the work of Paul (2015), who identifies that the women in his research are engaging in sports that are still conceptualized as a male preserve, they too are experiencing empowerment through participation but are still having to negotiate their femininity or fight against being taken seriously.

This study draws on data from a small group of participants. It shows the importance of how being involved in power sports and developing physical strength works towards individually empowering women so that they can challenge societies outdated ideologies that are associated to femininity. The women in this study are still having to justify they belong in power sports because of a preconceived idea that still exists in society that associates power and strength to men. Current literature (Paul 2015; Howe 2003; Krane 2001; George 2005) shows more and more women are actively engaging in sports that are still perceived 'too masculine' for them to participate in. This can also be seen in the current study where the women are still having to negotiate their way around traditional ideologies of what is expected of them and how they define their femininity.

Through the involvement in power sports the women are able to challenge the traditional ideologies of women being weak and passive. The studies associated to women being involved in sports that are physically demanding all refer to the fact that physical strength and force enables women to reject the idea that they are weak (Chu et al 2003; Paul 2015; McNaughton 2012). The strength and empowerment women gain from being involved in power sports means women have the confidence to deal with the prejudice they experience in wider society and go on and achieve outside of the sport in their everyday life. The women in the study continue to deal with prejudice outside of the culture because of their choices in sport but choose to embrace the power and strength that comes with being involved with power sports and dismiss the idea that it makes them less feminine. It is important for all the women in the study to not be seen as weak and passive but strong and independent and able to lead a life without the need to live up to the traditional ideals that see them as the submissive gender. There is a shift in society and more women are

taking up more physically demanding sports even though they continue to face unique challenges towards their femininity, gender and body experiences that have all to be negotiated in society (Velija et al 2014; Krane 2001; Weaving 2014). Howe (2003) points out sport should no longer be seen as a male domain and the women in the study are showing they can participate in these arenas that are male dominated and they can develop physical strength. They are the pioneers that will lead the way for other girls and women that will work towards demolishing the dominant idea that women are the weak, passive gender and will no longer be defined by those ideals.

### **5.3 Recommendations for future research**

Several areas of research could be explored and one of these avenues could be finding women who are in a similar position as the researcher in a lead coach position. Either, in power sports or in a similar area to compare journeys and understand what it is to be involved in these male dominated environments in a position of authority. This could be studied using an individual, or again as a small sample group with the importance being that the sample group be of women that are head coaches of sports that are predominantly seen as a male preserve and not just women participating.

A larger sample group would be of interest in understanding women's participation in power sports it would enable a much broader understanding of women being involved in this culture. This would have to be a mixed methods approach using questionnaires and interviews and study in the field. As more and more women are being drawn to these cultures and realising the potential to change society's attitudes towards strong women this could provide an up to date understanding of the changing attitudes towards why women are choosing these sports and how there is possibly a changing face to how strength athletes are seen.

Why are some women still caught up with the idea that lifting weights is not seen as feminine? Aside from the health benefits that are associated to being strong throughout your life. The empowerment that comes with being strong should be enough to get more women involved. A sample group of women that do not lift



against a sample group that is participating in power sports could be interesting in understanding the two groups. This could be just a small sample group two or three in each group using a qualitative approach using interviews and study in the field would help to gain an understanding from both groups.

All of the avenues discussed above would work towards exploring how physical strength works towards empowering women to be confident, strong and independent.

The study has produced a new context of sport that has been very difficult to find any literature on. Current literature has looked at physically demanding sports such as rugby and mixed martial arts. These sports are predominantly seen as a male environment and have shown that women who participate in them not only experience mental and physical empowerment but also have to deal with issues that are still associated to outdated ideas that are connected to traditional ideologies and feminine ideals. This study has highlighted that women are still having to negotiate around these outdated issues whilst participating in power sports. Power sports is just another culture for women to pursue in order to emancipate themselves from traditional ideologies that are still prevalent in our society. Dworkin (2001) talks of a glass ceiling in understanding women's fitness. But, the women in the study show that they are pushing past this glass ceiling and are embracing strength and everything that comes with it. Aaltonen (2012) highlights the female body has been seen as that of a victim and the man's body is that of the aggressor. The women in the study show that through participating in power sports they gain strength and with that comes independence and confidence in every area of their life. Power sports along with other contact sports are challenging traditional stereotypes. The preconceived ideas of what women should or should not be doing are still predominant in today's society. The study shows that more women are embracing more physically demanding sports like power sports in order to set out new ideals of ideologies that show women to be strong and competitive. They are setting out their own pathway of what femininity means and are also educating the wider society of what a strong athlete looks like because, actually strength does not equate itself with being big and male.

#### **5.4 Reflection of the research process**

In accepting an ethnographic stance for this research it has become evident, power sports are an under researched area. In adopting an ethnographic approach for the research it has enabled me to reflect deeply not only on my own position as a coach but also as an athlete. Whilst purposive sampling was assumed and the women chosen for the research had diverse backgrounds it became evident through the analysis they were introduced to the power sports because of my introduction meaning, their journey into the culture of power sports would be completely different to mine.

The journey the research has taken me on has meant that I have realised my role as a female coach in these predominately masculine environments is a massively important one. I am a pioneer for other women to realise their own potential as a Thai boxing coach or a strength coach. My knowledge and understanding now of what being a feminist means, has enabled me to have rich debates with men and women and to enlighten them as to the importance of being able to have the freedom of choice to do something without prejudice. A message I did not even realise before this research I was already doing and now truly because of the research I can back up with academic knowledge and education.

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## Appendix A



Centre for  
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[www.bournemouth.ac.uk/cesr](http://www.bournemouth.ac.uk/cesr)

### Participant information sheet

The nature of this study is to look at what it means to be a woman that participates in power sports and the aims to this research is to give a 21<sup>st</sup> century voice to the women that participate in what has traditionally been seen as a masculine sport in

order to evaluate if the women still struggle with oppressive traditional ideologies, and to explore the gender power dynamic between male and female power sports athletes.

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary and you can withdraw at any time. Participation of the interviews will vary from 30 minutes to an hour and will take place at an informal location or your choice for optimum comfort and you will be asked a series of questions that relate to the research.

You have been chosen by the researcher because of your involvement within power sports and the researcher feels that you will be able to bring an interesting perspective to the research.

More research needs to be done in order to understand women's participation within power sports and your involvement within the study will help to highlight any negative or positive experiences and hopefully bring forward new perspectives so that future generations of women will be able find it easier to be involved within these sports without the fear of discrimination.

Your involvement within the study will remain anonymous and strict confidentiality will be followed.

The data collected will go towards the study of the Masters Research that will be written up as a Thesis.

If you have any question or queries of this research please contact Janine Davis at:-

[Janinecdavis2015@outlook.com](mailto:Janinecdavis2015@outlook.com) – 07818568748 or Dr Ian Jones at :-

[jonesi@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:jonesi@bournemouth.ac.uk) - 01202965164

## Appendix B



Centre for  
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**Consent Form for: An ethnographic study  
exploring the experiences of women who participate  
in power sports.**

Please tick the appropriate boxes

I have read and understood the project information sheet.....

I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project.....

I agree to take part in the project. Taking part in the project will include (*indicate form of participation e.g. being interviewed and recorded (audio or video)*).....

I understand that my taking part is voluntary; I can withdraw from the study at any time up until [give withdrawal date] and I will not be asked questions about why I no longer want to take part.....

Select only one of the next two options:

I would like my name used where I have said or written as part of this study will be used in reports, publications and other research outputs so that anything I have contributed to this project can be recognised.....

I do not want my name used in this project.....

I understand my personal details such as phone number or address will not be revealed to people outside of this project.....

I understand that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs but my name will not be used unless I requested it above.....

I agree for the data I provided to be archived and made available to other researchers on request.....

I understand that other researchers will have access to these data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of these data.....

I understand that other researchers may use my words in publications, reports, web pages and other research outputs.....

I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials related to this project to Janine Davis.....

On this basis I am happy to participate in the [name of project] study

Name of Participant ..... Signature.....  
Date.....

Name of Researcher..... Signature.....  
Date.....

If you have any queries or concerns, please contact :-

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[jonesi@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:jonesi@bournemouth.ac.uk) - 01202965164

**One copy to be kept by the participant, one to be kept by the researcher**



